

ASHER'S COLLECTION
OF
ENGLISH AUTHORS
BRITISH AND AMERICAN.

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

VOL. 103.

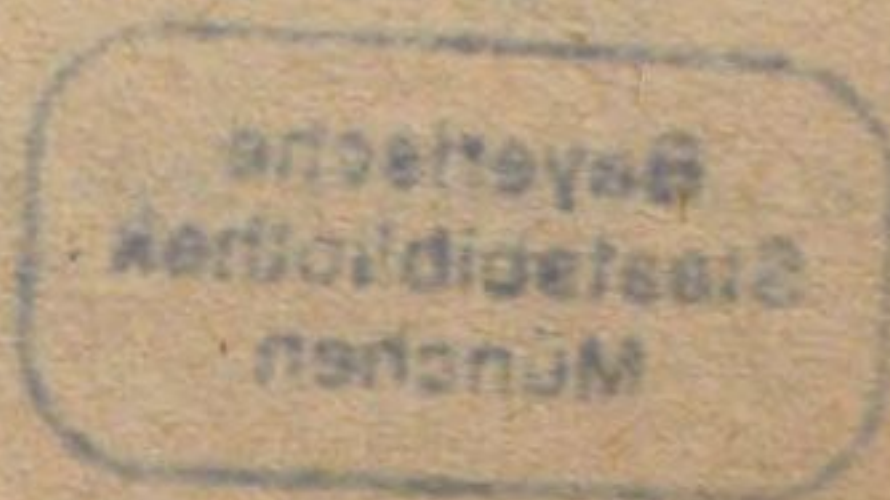
THE DREADED GUEST AND OTHER TALES

BY

M. E. BRADDON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



ASHER'S COLLECTION
OF
ENGLISH AUTHORS
BRITISH AND AMERICAN

ASHER'S EDITION.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

ROBERT AINSLEIGH 3 VOLS.
TO THE BITTER END 3 VOLS.
MILLY DARRELL AND OTHER TALES 1 VOL.

THE DREADED GUEST AND OTHER TALES

BY

M. F. BRADDON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek
München

THE DREADED GUEST

AND

OTHER TALES.

BY

M. E. BRADDON.

AUTHOR OF 'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.'

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

BERLIN

JULIUS ENGELMANN.

1875.

The right of Translation is reserved.

THE DREADED GUEST

OTHER TALES

M. E. BRADDOCK

Author of "The DREADED GUEST"

Illustrated by J. H. B. B. B.

First Edition

Copyright 1911

Two Volumes

VOL. II

BERLIN

JOHNS RINGELMANN

1911

Printed by J. H. B. B. B.

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.



	PAGE
COLONEL BENYON'S ENTANGLEMENT (<i>continued</i>) . . .	I
THE ZOOPHYTE'S REVENGE	63
AT CHRUGHTON ABBEY	117
THREE TIMES	179
ON THE BRINK	225

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

PAGE	
1	COLONEL BENYON'S ENTANGLEMENT
63	THE SCOPHYTE'S REVENGE
147	AT CHRIGHTON ABBEY
179	THREE TIMES
227	ON THE BRINK

COLONEL BENYON'S
ENTANGLEMENT

(Continued)

COLONEL BENYON'S

EXTANGLEMENT

(Continued)

CHAPTER II.

Name her not now, sir; she's a deadly theme.'

FOR the first fortnight of his sojourn at Trewardell, Colonel Benyon's Cornish experiences were altogether agreeable. The weather was brilliant; and in a county much given to moisture he was not inconvenienced by a single shower. There was plenty for him to see within a day's ride: here a ruined castle, there a nobleman's seat renowned amongst the show places of the west; and during those first two weeks the Colonel spent the greater part of every day in the saddle; or on foot, tramping over sunburnt hills high above a broad sweep of sea, while his horse rested at some solitary rustic inn. He was somewhat inclined to forget how short a time had gone by since he was lying in his Indian bungalow, well-nigh given over by the regimental doctors. Perhaps in that first fortnight of genuine enjoyment he sowed the seeds of a mischief which was to overtake him by and by.

The third week brought him into September, and he had a good time of it among the partridges, with Andrew Johns for his guide and counsellor. For three consecutive mornings the two men set out at daybreak when the dew was heavy upon the ground, and tramped over miles of stubble and turnip-field before breakfast. On the fourth day the Colonel suddenly knocked under, and told Mr. Johns that he had had enough, just for the present. Partridge-shooting was all very well in its way; but there were shooting-pains in the Colonel's limbs, and a dull perpetual aching in the Colonel's shoulders, which a man of forty rarely cares to cultivate. There was a drizzling rain, too, upon that fourth day of September; and Colonel Benyon was very glad to find a blazing fire in the bright-looking drawing-room, wherein he had a knack of painting imaginary scenes—scenes out of that tragical drama of which Flora Hammersley had been the heroine.

In his enforced idleness to-day, the thought of his friend's sorrow, and this woman's sin, haunted him more vividly than ever. That young soldier lying dead in the chill autumn sunrise on the sands near Blankenburg, slain by a hand that had never before been lifted to do a cruel thing—the hand of a

generous single-minded man. As to the fact of Fred Hammersley's share in this transaction, Colonel Benyon felt no doubt. His friend had killed the seducer. It was the thing he would have done himself, unhesitatingly, under like circumstances. He walked up and down the room. He had read yesterday's *Times* and *Globe*, *Standard* and *Telegraph*, and there was no more mental pabulum for him till a post came in—per special messenger on pony from the nearest post-town—at five o'clock P.M. At another time Mr. Hammersley's splendid library might have afforded him ample entertainment; but to-day he was in no humour for books; he had opened half-a-dozen or so, and after skimming a page or two absently, had put each volume back on its particular shelf. He could not fasten his mind upon any subject.

The rain came down in a monotonous hopeless way; even the standard roses on the lawn outside had a dreary look. The Colonel longed, like Horace Walpole, to bring them indoors and put them by the fire. Sometimes Colonel Benyon stood staring out at the deluged garden; sometimes he threw himself into a low arm-chair by the fire, and amused himself by a savage demolition of the coals; anon he paced the room again, pausing now and then, in an idle

way, to examine some one of those womanly trifles whose presence reminded him of the lost mistress of Trewardell.

The day seemed interminable. He was glad when it grew dark; still more glad of the slight distraction afforded by his seven-o'clock dinner, though he had no appetite—an utter distaste for food, indeed—and a burning thirst.

‘I feel very much as I used to feel at the beginning of my fever,’ he said to himself, a little alarmed by these symptoms, and by the heaviness and aching of his limbs. ‘God forbid that I should have another spell of it!’

Andrew Johns had gone to the market-town on business connected with the victualling of the small household; and Mrs. Johns had put on a black-silk gown and her best cap to wait upon the Colonel, not caring to trust that delicate office to the fat-faced rustic handmaiden.

‘The girls we get hereabouts are so rough,’ she said; ‘and this one has never been used to much out of the dairy. We had a houseful of servants when Mr. Hammersley lived here; but since he’s gone abroad there’s been scarcely enough work for me and a girl.’

The dame gave a profound sigh. Colonel Benyon perceived that she was garrulously given, and perceived that if he had a mind to hear about his friend's history in this house, it would not require any great effort to set Mrs. Johns discoursing thereupon.

'Do try one of those red mullet, sir; I dressed them with my own hands. It's a sauce that Mr. Hammersley was fond of—poor dear gentleman!'

Here came another profound sigh; and the dame lingered, trifling absently with the arrangements of the sideboard, as if willing to be questioned.

'You seem to have been very fond of your master,' said the Colonel.

'We shouldn't be much account if we weren't fond of him,' replied Mrs. Johns. 'He was as good a master as ever lived. We'd known him from a boy, too. He used to come down to Penrose Abbey for his holidays in the old Squire's time—Mr. Penrose; you've heard tell of him, I daresay, sir. Andrew and me were butler and cook at Penrose for twenty years. Mr. Hammersley was only a distant relation to the Squire, you see, sir, and nobody thought that he'd come in for all the property; but he did. I suppose Mr. Penrose took a fancy to him when he was a boy;

but there were plenty more young nephews and cousins on the look-out for his money, I can tell you.'

'Did Mr. Penrose ever live here?'

'No, sir. Trewardell was his mother's place, and it was shut up after her death. But since Mr. Hammersley came into the estate, the abbey has been kept as a show house. He didn't care to live there: it was cold and gloomy, he said; and he took a fancy to this place, and had it done up against his marriage—a power of money he spent upon it, to be sure. But, dear me, sir, you haven't eat a mouthful of that mullet. Perhaps you don't like the sauce?'

'It's excellent, my dear Mrs. Johns, but I really have no appetite this evening.'

'And there's a boiled fowl with stewed artichokes, and a brace of those birds you shot the day before yesterday. I hope you'll eat something, sir.'

'I'm sorry to do injustice to such good cooking; but upon my word, I can't eat a morsel. If you'll make me a stiffish glass of brandy-and-water, as hot as you can make it, I think perhaps it might do me some good. I had a bad fever in India, and seem to have a touch of my old enemy to-night.'

'Wouldn't you like Andrew to ride back for the

doctor, as soon as he comes in? or I could send one of the men at once, sir.'

'On no account. Pray don't make an invalid of me. I walked a little too far after the partridges yesterday; I daresay I've knocked myself up, that's all. Even if I should feel worse, which I don't expect, I've some medicine in my dressing-case.'

Mrs. Johns mixed the brandy-and-water with an anxious face, and watched the Colonel while he drank it. Then she persuaded him to return to the drawing-room, where she ensconced him luxuriously in an easy-chair by the fire, with a tiger-skin carriage-rug over his knees.

'Don't hurry away, Mrs. Johns,' he said, after duly acknowledging her attention. 'I like to hear you talk of my poor friend Hammersley; sit down by the fire, do, there's a good soul. That's right; it looks quite comfortable and homelike to see you sitting there. I could almost fancy I'd discovered some treasure in the way of an aunt. I can't tell you how dreary I've felt all day. My mind has been running perpetually upon poor Hammersley and his wife. It's no use speaking of them to your husband; if I do, he tightens up his lips in a most impenetrable way, and is dumb immediately.'

‘Yes, sir, that’s just like Andrew,’ replied the dame, smoothing her white-muslin apron and settling herself comfortably in the chair opposite the Colonel’s; ‘I think he’d lie down on the ground for his master to walk over him; but you can never get him to talk about him, nor of her either, poor soul!’

‘She behaved so badly, and worked such ruin, that I almost wonder you can find it in your heart to pity her,’ said the Colonel.

The good woman sighed again, and shook her head dubiously.

‘You see I knew her, sir,’ she replied; ‘and it isn’t likely I could bring myself to think as hardly of her as the rest of the world. She was such a noble generous creature, no one could ever have thought she would do such a wicked thing. She hadn’t been here very long before I found out that the love was all on one side in that marriage. She was very gentle and winning in all her ways towards her husband; but she didn’t care for him, and never had cared for him, and never would; that was plain enough to me. And she wasn’t happy; do what he would to please her, he couldn’t make her happy. There was a look in her face of missing something—a sort of blank look; and whenever her husband was

away—though goodness knows that was not often—she would roam about the house in a restless way that gave one the dismals only to watch her.'

'Did he see that she was unhappy, do you think?' asked the Colonel.

'No, sir, I don't think he did; and that's why it came upon him like a thunderclap when she ran away. He was so bent upon making her happy, that I think he believed she was so. He was so proud of her too. Everybody admired her. She was the loveliest woman in the county, they said, though the west is famous for pretty women; and she was so clever—such a sweet singer. It was she who painted all the pictures in this room and in the hall. It was Mr. Hammersley's fancy to have none but what she had painted.'

'Did she belong to this part of the country?'

'O dear no, sir. Her family were Suffolk people, I've heard say; her father was a colonel in the Indian army, and there was a very large family of them—not too well off, I believe; so of course it was a very good match for her. I suppose she married to please her friends; such things seem common enough nowadays. She was always very sweetspoken and affable with me. One day when I was talking to her

of a son of mine—my only child, that died young—she said, “Ah, Mrs. Johns, I have my dead too!” and I fancied she was speaking of some sweetheart very like that she’d had in time past.’

‘Did Captain Champney come here as Hammersley’s friend?’

‘No, sir; he never came to this house at all; she must have met him out of doors. It was summer time, midsummer, and very sultry weather. Mr. Hammersley was up in London on business connected with his estate. He was to be away a week at most, and he had wanted her to go with him; but she wouldn’t, not being over well or strong at the time. She’d had a low nervous fever in the spring, that had pulled her down a good deal. It was the morning after her husband left—I remember it all as well as if it was yesterday—she had been out in the village and round about the lanes visiting the poor—she was a rare hand at that always—and she came in at one of those windows while I was dusting the china in this room. I never shall forget her. Her face was as white as a sheet, and she walked in a strange tottering way, with her eyes fixed, until she came right up against me. Then she gave a start, and dropped into the nearest chair, half fainting. I

brought her a glass of water, and asked her what had happened. "O Mrs. Johns," she said, "I've seen a ghost!" I couldn't get her to say more than this; all the rest of the day she was shut up in her room. The next day there came a messenger with a letter for her, and late in the afternoon the same man came again with another letter. They were both from the Captain, of course; but all that day she never stirred outside the doors, not so much as to go into the gardens, though it was a splendid summer day. Early the next morning there came another letter, and in the afternoon she went out. She wore her garden-hat and a light muslin dress, and she took nothing with her. I could lay my life that when she left the house that afternoon she had no thought of going away; but she never came back.'

'Were the two seen together in this neighbourhood?'

'Yes; a lad met Mrs. Hammersley and a strange gentleman in Farmer Goldman's field—there's a short cut across that way to the Penjudah-road—she had her hands clasped over her face, and was sobbing as if her heart would break, the boy said, and the gentleman was talking to her very earnestly. The boy turned and watched them. They loitered about,

talking for half an hour or so, Mrs. Hammersley crying almost all the time; and then the boy saw them get into a close carriage that had been waiting in the Penjudah-road, and heard the gentleman tell the man to drive to the station. This was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and the Plymouth train leaves Penjudah at a quarter to five. It came out afterwards that Captain Champney had been staying at the Rose and Crown at Penjudah, and had hired a close fly on that day. The driver could tell all the rest—how he had waited above an hour in the road near Trewardell, and picked up a lady there.'

'How soon did Hammersley learn what had happened?'

'My husband telegraphed to him that night, and he was back early the next evening. He was very quiet. I never saw any one take a great blow so quietly. He didn't bluster or rave, as some gentlemen would have done; but he sat in the library for one whole day, writing letters and seeing every one who had anything to tell him, while Andrew was about making inquiries quietly in every direction. There was no fuss or talk, considering, and it was only a few people knew anything of what had happened. As soon as Mr. Hammersley had heard all

he could hear in this place, he started off—after those two, I suppose ; and that's the last we ever saw of him. He wrote to Andrew soon after, telling him how the house was to be kept up, and so on ; and that was all.'

'You heard of Captain Champney's death, I suppose?' said the Colonel.

'Yes,' Mrs. Johns replied, with a doubtful air, 'we did hear that he was dead.'

'And you heard the strange manner of his death, no doubt?'

'We saw something in the papers, but didn't take much heed of it,' replied Mrs. Johns, with an air of not caring to pursue this subject.

The Colonel did not press it. There was no doubt in his own mind as to the hand that had slain Champney, and he fancied that Mrs. Johns shared his conviction upon that subject.

'Have you ever heard what became of Mrs. Hammersley?' he asked presently.

'Not a word, sir. That's what makes me pity her sometimes, in spite of myself. It's a hard thing for her to be left like that, without a soul to care for her—him that she sinned for dead and gone. She may be starving somewhere, poor misguided creature!

without a roof to cover her perhaps, and these empty rooms looking as if they were waiting for her all the while, with all the pretty things she was so fond of just as she left them. It always gives me the heart-ache to think of her, or to touch any of the things that belonged to her.'

'Was it Hammersley's wish that the place should be kept just as she left it?'

'Yes, sir, that was one of his orders in the letter of instruction that he wrote to my husband before he left England.'

'Is there no portrait of her anywhere about the house?'

'No, sir. There was a likeness of her, painted by some great artist in London, but I never saw that after the day when Mr. Hammersley came back and found her gone. Whether he destroyed it in secret that day, or put it away somewhere under lock and key, I can't tell. I only know that when I came into this room next morning the picture was gone. There's the blank space where it hung just above your head.'

The Colonel looked up. Yes, there was the empty panel. On the opposite side of the fireplace there was a portrait of his friend, little more than a

head, against a dark background, bold and truthful, by the hand of John Philip. He had made a shrewd guess why the companion picture was missing.

He had been so much interested in the house-keeper's talk as almost to forget his pain and weariness; but by this time the stimulating effect of his dose of brandy and water had worn off, and he felt really ill, quite as ill as when the first warning of his fever came upon him up the country.

'I'm afraid I'm in for it, Mrs. Johns,' he said, with a faint groan; 'I'm afraid I'm going to be very ill. Rather hard upon you and your husband, isn't it, and not in the bond? My friend lent me his house to get well in; he didn't bargain for my falling ill in it.'

Mrs. Johns did her best to console and cheer him with assurances that his symptoms indicated nothing more than a cold and a little over-fatigue.

'A cold's a hazardous thing for a man in my condition, my good soul,' said the Colonel, 'and I was a fool to overdo it with those long tramps over the damp stubble. The doctor who sent me home gave me all manner of solemn warnings as to what I might and might not do, and I'm afraid I've paid very little attention to any of them. However, I'll go to bed at

once, take a dose of the fellow's medicine, and wrap myself in a blanket. Perhaps I may be all right in the morning. But if I should be worse, you'd better telegraph to Plymouth for one of the best medical men there. Don't put me in the hands of a local doctor.'

Mrs. Johns promised to obey these instructions, still protesting that the Colonel would be better in the morning; and then hurried off to see that there was a blazing fire made in his bedroom, and to provide one of her thickest blankets in which to envelop him.

CHAPTER III.

‘ Ah, homeless as the leaf that winds have blown
To earth—in this wide world I stand alone.’

THE Colonel's dismal prophecy was but too faithfully realised. The next morning found him in a raging fever, with a furred tongue, bloodshot eyes, a galloping pulse, and racking pains in his limbs. It was no case of infection, no village epidemic. The Colonel had simply, in his own language, overdone it.

Mrs. Johns opined that this was the beginning of a rheumatic fever; but she still kept up her cheery tone to the patient, looking anxiously all the while for the advent of the Plymouth doctor.

He did not come till sunset, by which time the Colonel was worse. After making a careful examination of his patient, and questioning Mrs. Johns closely as to the Colonel's antecedents, the physician sat down to write a prescription.

‘It is not so much a question of physic as of care,’ he said. ‘You have not called in any one from the neighbourhood yet, I suppose?’

‘No, sir. Colonel Benyon begged me not to call in any one of that kind, or else I should have sent at once for Mr. Borlase.’

‘Never mind what the Colonel says. Let your husband call for Mr. Borlase, and get this prescription made up. He can ask Mr. Borlase to come back with him and see me. Or, let me see, there’ll scarcely be time for that. I can call on Borlase as I drive back to the station, and explain matters. Mr. Borlase will watch the case for me.’

‘But you’ll come to see him again, sir?’

‘Most decidedly. This is Friday. I shall come again on Monday by the same train. The case is rather a critical one.’

‘You don’t think there’s any danger, sir?’

‘Not immediate danger; but the man’s constitution has been undermined by hard work and illness in India, and he’s not a good subject for rheumatic fever. However, I shall be able to say more on Monday. In the mean time, the grand question is good nursing. I think I had better send you a professional nurse.’

Mrs. Johns protested her ability to nurse the Colonel herself; but the physician shook his head.

‘My good creature you have your house to look after,’ he said, ‘and that poor fellow will want constant watching. We must expect delirium in such a case. You and your husband must contrive to look after him to-night, and I will send you a reliable person early to-morrow morning.’

Having made this promise, the doctor got into the fly from the Rose and Crown, and drove back to Penjudah, where he had a brief interview with Mr. Borlase, who came out of his trim-looking stone house and stood upon the pavement before his door, while the great man talked to him out of the fly.

‘I shall send a nurse from Plymouth to-morrow morning,’ said the physician. ‘There’s no one about here, I suppose, that one could depend upon for such a case?’

‘I don’t know about that,’ replied Mr. Borlase. ‘There’s a person I’ve had a good deal to do with lately amongst my very poor patients, and if you could only get her, you’d find her a treasure; but whether she would attend a wealthy person as a paid

servant is a question I can't answer. She has only nursed the poor hereabouts, and evidently does it as a pious duty. I fancy, from her dress and manner, that she belongs to some religious community—not exactly Roman Catholic perhaps, but very near it.'

'Who is she?'

'A Mrs. Chapman—a widow; poor herself, I suppose, for she occupies very humble lodgings in Bolter's-row, at the other end of the town. She never takes payment from any one; indeed, she only attends a class that are quite unable to pay. She is a young woman, fragile-looking, and very pretty; but she is the best nurse I ever met with.'

'I don't think the Colonel will object to her youth and good looks,' said the doctor, laughing. 'That kind of thing is much pleasanter in a sick-room than some gorgon of the Gamp species. Have you known this Mrs. Chapman long?'

'Not long. She has only been here three months; but I have seen a great deal of her in that time; and I can answer for her patience and devotion.'

'I've half an hour to spare before my train starts. I'll go down to Bolter's-row, and have a look at this paragon of yours.'

'I'm sure you will be pleased with her; but I

very much doubt your being able to get her to do what we want,' said Mr. Borlase.

'We'll see about that,' answered the physician, who had some confidence in his own powers of persuasion. 'You say the woman is poor. She'll scarcely care to decline an advantageous offer, I should think. Good-night, Borlase. Be sure you go to Trewardell the first thing to-morrow.'

With this injunction the doctor drove away down the little hilly High-street to the outskirts of Penjudah, where he alighted, and groped his way along a narrow alley of queer old-fashioned cottages, so crooked that they seemed scarcely able to support themselves in a standing position.

Upon inquiring for Mrs. Chapman, he was directed to the last house in Bolter's-row, and he was ushered into a tiny sitting-room, daintily neat, and with an air of freshness and prettiness that struck him as something beyond the common graces of poverty. The room was dimly lighted by one candle, beside which a woman sat reading; a slim fragile creature in a black gown and a white-muslin cap of some peculiar fashion, a cap which concealed almost every vestige of her hair, and gave a nunlike aspect to her pale thin face.

The doctor felt at once that this was no vulgar sick-nurse. This was not a woman to whom he could broadly offer money as an inducement to her to depart from her established round of duty.

He told her his errand, told her what he had heard from Mr. Borlase, and how anxious he was to secure her services for a gentleman lying dangerously ill.

'It is quite impossible,' she said, in a sweet firm voice. 'I nurse only the very poor.'

'You belong to some sisterhood, I suppose?' said the physician.

'No; I belong to no sisterhood,' she answered, with something that was half bitterness, half sorrow in her tone; 'I stand quite alone in the world.'

'Pray pardon me; I thought by your dress you might be a member of one of those communities so numerous nowadays.'

'No, sir. It is a simple dress, and suits my circumstances; that is my only reason for wearing it. I have made my own line of duty, and try to follow it.'

'I wonder you should have chosen so obscure a place as Penjudah as a field for your charitable work. Do you belong to this part of the country?'

'No. The place is quiet, and I can live cheaply

here. Up to this time I have always found plenty of work.'

'The duty you have chosen is a very noble one, and the sacrifice most admirable in so young a woman.'

'It is no sacrifice for me,' she answered decisively; and the doctor felt he had no right to ask any more questions.

He pressed his request very warmly, however; so much so, that at last Mrs. Chapman seemed almost inclined to yield.

'You have owned that you have no pressing duties in Penjudah just now,' he said, when they had been talking together for some time; 'and I do assure you that you will be performing a real act of charity in looking after this poor fellow at Trewardell.'

It was the first time he had mentioned the name of the place.

'At Trewardell, did you say?' asked Mrs. Chapman.

'Yes. It's a gentleman's house, seven miles from here; a charming place. This Colonel Benyon is a friend of the owner, who has lived abroad for some years. Pray, now, consider the case, and extend your charity to this poor man, Mrs. Chapman.'

Remember it's not as if he were in the bosom of his family. He's quite alone, with no one in the house but servants, and a stranger in the land, as one may say. Of course I might send a nurse from Plymouth, as I intended in the first case ; but after what Mr. Borlase told me, I set my heart upon having you.'

'Mr. Borlase is very good. I will come.'

He had expected to conquer in the end, but had not expected her to yield so suddenly.

'You will ! That's capital ; and allow me to say that, as far as remuneration goes, you will be quite at liberty to name your own terms.'

'Pray do not mention that. I could not possibly take payment for my services. I shall come to Colonel Benyon as I should to the poorest patient in Penjudah.'

'Do just what you please, only come ; and the sooner the better.'

'I can come immediately—to-night, if you please.'

'I should be very glad if you will do so. I am just off to the station, and will send my fly to take you back to Trewardell.'

'Back to Trewardell !' Mrs. Chapman repeated those three last words as if there were something strange in them.

The doctor was too hurried to notice anything peculiar in her tone. As it was, he ran some risk of losing his train. He wished her good-night, and went back to the fly.

CHAPTER IV.

‘ There are some things hard to understand :
O, help me, my God, to trust in Thee ;
But I never shall forget her soft white hand,
And her eyes when she looked at me.’

COLONEL BENYON had a hard time of it. Again, as in his Indian bungalow, grim Death claimed him for his own, and was only to be kept at bay by prodigies of care and skill ; again the lamp of life flickered low, and for a while the sick man lay in a land where all was darkness, knowing no one, remembering nothing, and suffering the unspeakable agonies of a mind distraught. There is no need to describe the variations of the fever, the changes from bad to worse, the faint improvement, the threatened relapse. Through all that month of September Mr. Borlase came twice a day, and the Plymouth physician twice a week, to Trewardell. They both declared themselves proud of their victory when Herbert Benyon could be fairly

pronounced out of danger. They both acknowledged that they owed that victory, under Providence, to Mrs. Chapman.

She had been indefatigable, working and watching by day and night with a quiet patience that knew no limit. No other hand than hers had ever administered the Colonel's medicine, or smoothed his pillow, since she came to Trewardell; no eyes but hers had watched him in the dead of the night. It was quite in vain that Mr. Borlase and Mrs. Johns had urged her to accept assistance, to let some one relieve her of her night-watch now and then. Upon this point she was inexorable. If she ever slept at all, she so planned her slumbers that they should not interfere with her duties. Sometimes in the dusk of the evening, when it was very nearly dark even out of doors, she would take a solitary walk in the gardens for half an hour or so. That was her only relaxation. Sweet and gentle as she was in her manners, she was rather an unapproachable person, and she contrived to keep Mrs. Johns at a distance; which was somewhat galling to that matron, who had never been able to beguile her into a little friendly gossip since she entered the house.

'She's as proud as Lucifer, I do believe, in spite

of her meek quiet ways,' Mrs. Johns declared to her husband, with an aggrieved expression of countenance. 'Why, I've scarcely heard her voice half-a-dozen times since she's been here; and I can't say that I've seen her face properly yet, that black hood she wears overshadows it so. I hate such popish ways.'

This hood which Mrs. Johns objected to had certainly a somewhat conventual aspect, and served to hide the nurse's pale sweet face much more than the cap in which Dr. Matson had first seen her. The physician perceived the change of headgear when he came to Trewardell, but considered it only a part of that harmless eccentricity which might be permitted to this lay sister of charity.

The time came at last when Herbert Benyon awoke from that long night of suffering and delirium to some faint interest in external things. He had not been unconscious all this time; on the contrary, for long afterwards he had a keen remembrance of every detail of his illness; but mixed up with all the realities of his life had been the dreams and delusions of fever. He knew that throughout his illness by day and night a slender black-robed figure had sat

by his bed-side, or flitted lightly about his room; he knew that a woman's soft hand had administered to his comforts day after day, without change or weariness; he knew that a very sweet sad face had looked down upon him in the dim lamplight with ineffable pity; but he had cherished strange fancies about this gentle watcher. Sometimes she was a sister he had loved very dearly, and lost in his early youth; sometimes she was Lady Julia Dursay. That she resembled neither of them mattered little to his wandering mind.

But this was all over now. He knew that he was at Trewardell, and that this black-robed woman was a stranger to him.

It was upon a Sunday, a mild October day, towards sunset, that he felt himself for the first time able to speak to his patient nurse. A broad bay-window in his room looked westward, and he saw the evening sky with a warm rosy light in it, and heard the rooks cawing in the avenue, and the church-bells ringing for evening service.

Mrs. Chapman was sitting by the window reading, with her hood thrown back, and her dark-brown hair only shrouded by her muslin cap. She did not wear the hood always, though Mrs. Johns had never

happened to see her without it. She had a habit of throwing it off at times.

The Colonel lay quite motionless, looking at the sky and at that quiet figure by the window, wondering dreamily who this woman was. Her profile was clearly defined against the soft light, as she sat there, unconscious that he was watching her; and Herbert Benyon thought that he had never seen a lovelier face.

It was a spiritualised beauty, sublimated by some great sorrow, the Colonel fancied. The glory and bloom of youth were gone, though the woman was evidently young; but with the loss of these she had gained in the charm of expression. It was a face that went to one's heart.

She turned from the window presently, hearing her patient stir, and came towards the bed. He saw that her eyes were gray, large, and dark, with a plaintive look in them.

'I did not know that you were awake,' she said gently. 'Let me alter your pillows a little, and then I will bring you some tea.'

It was the voice that had been with him in all his foolish dreams. It seemed as if he had come back to life out of a living grave, bringing only this memory

with him. She bent over him, arranging the pillow, which had slipped to a position of torture on the edge of the bed. The dexterous hands made all comfortable in a few moments, while the lovely face looked down upon him.

‘How good you have been to me all this time!’ he said. He had uttered protestations of gratitude and regard many times during his delirium, but these were the first thoroughly sensible words he had spoken to her.

The surprise overcame her a little. Sudden tears started to her eyes, and she turned her head aside to hide them.

‘Thank God!’ she exclaimed earnestly; ‘thank God!’

‘For what?’ asked the Colonel.

‘That you are so much better.’

‘I have been very ill, then, I suppose?’

‘You have been very ill.’

‘Off my head, haven’t I? Yes, I know I thought myself up the country; and that I could hear the jackals screaming outside. And I am really in Cornwall, down at Hammersley’s place—poor Hammersley!—and you have been nursing me for I don’t know how long! You see I am quite rational now. I thought

once you were my sister — a girl who died nearly twenty years ago.'

'Yes, you are much better; but pray do not talk. You are very weak still, and the doctors would be angry with me for letting you talk so much.'

'Very well. I will be as quiet as a lamb; indeed I don't feel capable of disobeying you. But there is one question that I must ask.'

'I do not mind answering one question, if I can.'

'To what beneficent influence do I owe your care of me? what freak of fortune brought such a ministering angel to my sick-bed?'

'I am here to perform a work of charity, that is all,' she answered quietly; 'I am a nurse by profession.'

'But you are a lady!' he exclaimed, surprised.

'That does not prevent my nursing the sick.'

'Then you do not mean that you are a hospital nurse—a person to be engaged by any one who needs your services?'

'You are asking more than one question. No; I am not a hospital nurse, nor do I take payment for my services.'

'I thought not,' murmured the Colonel, with a faint sigh of relief.

It would have shocked him, somehow, to discover that the patient watcher whom he had mistaken now for his lost sister—anon for his false love—was only a hireling after all.

‘I wished to perform some duty in the world, being quite alone, and I chose that of attendance on the sick poor. I have never wearied of it yet.’

‘And have you been long engaged in this good work?’

‘Not very long; but you must not talk any more. I must positively forbid that.’

The Colonel submitted very reluctantly. He was so eager to know all about this woman—this ministering angel, as he called her in his own mind. He repeated Scott's familiar lines in a low voice as she moved softly about the room making preparations for his evening meal.

Betsy Jane, the fat-faced housemaid, brought the tea-tray.

Mrs. Johns had avoided all actual attendance on the sick-room of late, offended by the nurse's standoffishness. The Colonel did not want her, she said. He had that fine lady with her popish headgear.

Mrs. Chapman arranged the tea-things on the table by the bed—the small home-baked loaf, the

tiny rolls of rich yellow butter, and a noble block of honeycomb on a glass dish. There was a nosegay of autumnal flowers, too, for the embellishment of the table; and altogether Herbert Benyon fancied that innocent repast the most tempting banquet that had ever been spread for him.

‘Please sit there, and pour out my tea,’ he said, in his weak voice. ‘But see, you have forgotten your own cup and saucer,’ he added, looking at the table.

‘I will drink my tea presently.’

‘You must drink it now with me, or I will drink none.’

She complied; it was not worth while arguing with him about such a trifle. She brought the second cup and saucer, and sat where he ordered her. He looked at her very often as he sipped the tea she had poured out for him, and ate bread and honey, like the queen in the famous nursery rhyme. He looked at her, wondering what her life had been, with an intense curiosity only possible to a prisoner in a sick-room. He would have given the world to question her farther; but that was forbidden, to say nothing of the impertinence of such a proceeding. He was fain to lie there, and look at her with fixed dreamy eyes, speculating idly about her and her history.

The patient had taken a turn, and the doctors rejoiced exceedingly; but his progress even now was very slow. He lay for four long weeks almost as helpless as a child, attended upon day and night by Mrs. Chapman and a young man out of the stables, a handy young fellow, whose genius had been developed by the exigences of the case, and who made a very decent amateur valet. How he should have endured this dreary time without Mrs. Chapman's care and companionship, Herbert Benyon could not imagine. She brightened the dismal monotony of the sick-room, and lightened his burden for him more than words could tell; and yet she was by no means what any one would call a lively person. Indeed, after that close companionship of many weeks, Colonel Benyon could not remember ever having seen her smile. But her presence had an influence upon him that was better than commonplace cheerfulness. She read to him, and the low sweet voice was like music. She talked to him, and every word helped to reveal the wealth of a highly-cultivated mind. With such a companion life could not be irksome, even in a sick-room.

Before the fourth week of that first stage of his convalescence was ended, Colonel Benyon had made

many efforts to learn his nurse's history; but had failed utterly in the endeavour.

'My story is common enough,' she told him once, when he said that he was convinced there was some romance in her life. 'I have lost all that I ever loved, and am obliged to interest myself in strangers.'

'You are very young to be a widow,' said the Colonel. 'Had you been long married when Mr. Chapman died?'

A sudden look of pain came into her face.

'Not very long. Please do not ask me to recall my past life. My history is the history of the dead.'

After this he could not push his curiosity farther; but he was not a little tormented by his desire to know more. In the dead of the night he lay awake saying to himself, 'Who the deuce could this Chapman have been to leave his wife in such a desolate position? and what has become of her own relations? I would stake my chances of promotion that she is a lady by birth; but how comes a lady to be left to carry out such a quixotic scheme as this sick-nursing business?' For to the Colonel's mundane mind the nursing of the sick poor seemed an eccentric and abnormal employment for a well-bred young woman

—above all, for a beautiful woman like this widow, with the classic profile and luminous gray eyes.

As soon as the Colonel was strong enough to totter from his bed to a sofa, Dr. Matson suggested a change of quarters.

‘You must get nearer the sea,’ he said; ‘this flowery dell is all very well in its way; and you certainly do get a sniff of the Atlantic mixed with the perfume of your roses. But I should like to plant you somewhere on the very edge of the ocean. There is a decent inn at Penjudah, now, directly facing the sea, built almost upon the beach; a homely place enough, but where you would get very good treatment. I think we might move you there with advantage.’

The Colonel groaned.

‘I don’t feel strong enough to be moved from one room to another,’ he said.

‘I daresay not. There’s a good deal of prostration still, no doubt; but the change would do you a world of good. We must manage it somehow—contrive some kind of ambulance, and carry you in a recumbent position. Mrs. Chapman will go with you, of course.’

The Colonel's face brightened at this suggestion.

'Would you go?' he asked, looking at his nurse.

'Of course she would. She's not done with you yet, by any means. You are not going to slip out of our hands for some little time, I assure you, Colonel Benyon,' said Dr. Matson, with professional jocosity.

'I do not wish; I am quite content to remain an invalid,' replied the Colonel, looking at his nurse and not at his doctor.

The physician saw the look.

'Bless my soul,' he said to himself, 'is that the way the cat jumps? The Colonel's friends won't thank me for getting him such a good nurse, if he winds up by marrying her. That look was very suspicious.'

The doctor had his way. The chief inn at Penjudah was quite empty at this late period of the year; and the best rooms, old-fashioned capacious chambers facing the sea, were at the patient's disposal. So one fine morning, in the beginning of November, while the reddened leaves in this mild western country still lingered on the trees, Colonel

Benyon left Trewardell, which had been a somewhat unlucky shelter, it seemed.

Even on that last morning busy Mrs. Johns scarcely caught so much as a glimpse of the nurse's face ; but just at the final moment, when the Colonel had been made comfortable in the carriage, wrapped up to the eyes in woollen rugs and tiger-skins, Mrs. Chapman turned and held out her hand to the housekeeper. She had her veil down, a thick black veil, and she wore a close black bonnet of a somewhat bygone fashion.

'Good - bye, Mrs. Johns,' she said in her low plaintive voice. 'This is the last time I shall ever see Trewardell. Please shake hands before I go away.'

There was something that seemed almost humility in her tone. The housekeeper drew herself up rather stiffly, quite taken by surprise ; and then, in the next moment, her good-nature got the better of her resentment, and she took the proffered hand. What a slender little hand it seemed in the grasp of Sarah Johns' stout fingers !

'I am sure I bear you no malice, mum,' she said, 'though you have kept yourself so much to yourself, as if other folks weren't good enough for you ; and if

you like to walk over from Penjudah any fine afternoon to take a cup of tea with me and my husband, you'll be heartily welcome. There's always a bit of cold meat and an apple-pasty in the house.'

'You are very kind; but I feel somehow that I shall never see Trewardell again. May I gather one of those late roses? Thanks; I should like to take one away.'

She went to one of the standard rose-trees on the lawn, and gathered one solitary tea-rose—a pale primrose-coloured flower—a melancholy-looking blossom, the Colonel thought, when she took her seat in the carriage with this rose in her hand.

'I don't like to see you with that pale yellow flower,' he said; 'it reminds me of asphodel, and seems symbolical of death. I should like to do away with that ugly black bonnet, and crown you with a garland of bright red roses, the emblems of renewed youth and hope.'

She looked at him with sad earnest eyes.

'I have done with youth,' she said, 'and with hope, except—'

'Except what?' he asked eagerly.

'Except a hope that I do not care to talk about—the hope of something beyond this earth.'

After this the Colonel was silent. There was something in those grave words that sounded like a reproof.

Mrs. Johns stood in the porch watching the carriage drive away, with a thoughtful countenance. 'What was in her voice just now that gave me the shivers?' she said to herself, perplexed in spirit.

CHAPTER V.

' So may one read his weird, and reason,
And with vain drugs assuage no pain ;
For each man in his loving season
Fools and is fooled of these in vain.

Charms that allay not any longing,
Spells that appease not any grief,
Time brings us all by handfuls, wronging
All hurts with nothing of relief.'

COLONEL BENYON was in love. That rigid disciplinarian, that battered soldier, who had boasted for the last fifteen years of his freedom from anything approaching what he called 'an entanglement,' now awoke to the consciousness that he was the veriest fool in the universe, and that unless he could win this woman, of whose antecedents he knew nothing, for his wife, he was a lost man. That he could return to the outer world, that he could go back to India and begin life again without her, seemed to him impossible. His world had narrowed itself into the sick-chamber where she ministered to him. All

the voices of this earth seemed to have melted into that one low tender voice that read to him or talked with him in the long tranquil evenings. Until now he had scarcely known the meaning of a woman's companionship. Never had he lived in such close intimacy with any one, not even a masculine friend. But now he looked back at his hard commonplace life, the conventional society, the stereotyped pleasures, and wondered how he had endured so many years of such a barren existence. He loved her. For a long time — his idle weeks in that sick-room had seemed so long, giving him so much leisure for thought — he had struggled against this folly, if folly it were; but he had struggled in vain. He loved her. Her, and none other, would he have for his wife; and he told himself that it was, after all, no great sacrifice which he contemplated making. That she was a lady he had never doubted from the first hour when, restored to his sober senses, he had looked at her face and heard her voice. It was just possible that she was born of a less noble race than his own, though he could scarcely bring himself to believe even this; it was more than probable that she was very poor. The Colonel was glad of this last fact. It pleased him to think that his

wealth might give her a new and brighter life, surrounding her with all those luxuries and elegancies which seemed the natural attributes of her beauty.

Was there any hope for him? Well, yes, he was inclined to believe his case far from desperate. There was a subtle something in her looks and tones at times that made him fancy he was not quite indifferent to her, that he was more than the mere object of her charity. Nothing could be more vague than these signs and tokens, for she was the most reserved of women—the proudest, he sometimes thought—and he felt convinced that she was herself unconscious of them. But, slight as they were, they were sufficient to kindle hope in Herbert Benyon's breast, and he fancied that he had only to wait the fulness of time for the hour of his confession and the certainty of his happiness.

He was not eager to speak. There was time enough. This tranquil daily intercourse was so sweet to him, that he almost feared to end it by assuming a new relation to his gentle nurse. He did not want to scare her away just yet, even if she left him only to come back to him later as his wife. He wanted to have her all to himself a little longer in this easy undisturbed companionship.

So the days and weeks went on. The Colonel grew so much stronger, that Dr. Matson bade him good-bye, and even Mr. Borlase began to talk of releasing him. He was able to take a short stroll in the sunniest hour of the autumn day, leaning on his cane, and occasionally getting a little help from his nurse's supporting arm. He was very fond of Penjudah; the scattered houses on the sea-shore—the curious old-fashioned High-street straggling up a hill—the sheltered nook upon the grassy hill-side, that served as a burial-ground for the population of Penjudah—the rustic lanes, from which one looked right out upon the broad Atlantic—all these things grew very dear to the Colonel, and it seemed to him that he could be content to live in this remote western haven for ever with this one woman for his companion.

It was very nearly the end of November, but the weather was wonderfully mild in this region, the days bright and balmy, the evenings clear and calm. The Colonel stopped to rest sometimes in the burial-ground, seated on a moss-grown granite tomb, with his face towards the sea, and Mrs. Chapman by his side.

He had told her all the story of his past life, even

that ignominious episode of Lady Julia Dursay's ill-treatment. It was his delight to talk to her. He confided in her as he had never done in any one else. He had such unbounded faith in her integrity, such a fixed belief in her good sense. He had talked to her of his friend Hammersley, and had told her the story of the guilty mistress of Trewardell.

'Strange that we should both have come to grief about a woman, isn't it?' he asked; and Mrs. Chapman owned that it was very strange.

'You'd heard the story before, I daresay,' remarked the Colonel. 'I suppose all the gossips of Penjudah know it by heart?'

'Yes,' she answered, 'everybody in Cornwall knows it.'

It was the last day of November. Mr. Borlase had again talked about taking leave of his patient, and the Colonel was sitting on his favourite tomb, the memorial of some race whose grandeur was a memory of the past. He began to think the time was drawing near when he must make his confession and hear his fate. He was no coxcomb, yet he had no fear of the result; indeed, he was certain that she loved him. While he was meditating this in a dreamy way, in no hurry to speak, and quite satisfied with

the happiness of having the woman he loved by his side, Mrs. Chapman suddenly broke the silence.

‘You are so much better, Colonel Benyon,’ she began—‘almost well, indeed, Mr. Borlase says—that I think you can afford to spare me now. I have stayed with you already much longer than I felt to be really necessary, only’—she hesitated just for a moment, and then went rapidly on—‘only yours was a critical case, and I did not wish to leave you while there was the faintest chance of relapse. There is no fear of that now, and I am wanted elsewhere. There is a little boy in one of the cottages up the hill dying of consumption. His mother came to the hotel to speak to me last night, and I have promised her to go to him this evening.’

‘This evening!’ cried the Colonel, aghast. ‘You mean to leave me this evening!’

‘To go to a dying child, yes, Colonel Benyon,’ the nurse answered reproachfully. ‘There is so little that I can do for you now—for I suppose you may be trusted to take your medicines regularly—you really do not want me any longer.’

‘I do not want you any longer!’ repeated the Colonel, ‘I want you all my life. I want you for my wife!’ he went on, laying his hand upon her shoulder.

'I cannot live without you. You must stay with me, dearest, or only leave me to come back to me as my wife. We have no need of a long courtship. I think we know each other thoroughly as it is.'

'You think you know me thoroughly as it is!' the woman echoed, shrinking away from him, and standing with her face turned towards the sea, only the profile visible to the Colonel, and upon that the impress of a misery that struck him to the soul.

'My dear love, what is this?' he asked. 'Have I distressed you so much by my avowal? Am I so utterly repugnant to you?'

'Your wife,' she murmured, as if she had scarcely heard his last words, 'your wife!'

'Yes, dearest, my beloved and honoured wife. I did not believe it was in my nature to love any one as I love you.'

'That any man upon this earth should care for me!' she murmured; 'you, above all other men!' And then turning to him with a calmer face, she said decisively, 'That can never be, Colonel Benyon. You and I can never be more to one another than we have been. The wisest thing you can do is to wish me good-bye, here where we stand, and forget that you have ever known me.'

‘That is just the last thing possible to me,’ he answered impetuously. ‘There is nothing upon this earth I care to live for, if I cannot have you for my wife. You must have known that I loved you. You had no right to stay with me so long; you had no right to let me love you, if you meant to treat me like this at the last. But you do not mean to be so cruel; you are only trying me; you are only playing with your victim. O my darling, for pity’s sake, tell me that I am not quite indifferent to you!’

‘That is not the question,’ the woman replied quietly. ‘Have you thought of what you are doing, Colonel Benyon? Have you counted the cost? Have you thought what it is to intrust your name and your honour to the keeping of a woman of whom you know nothing?’

‘I know that you are an angel,’ he said, putting his arm round the slender figure, trying to draw her to his breast.

Again she shrank from him—this time with a gesture so repellent, that he drew back involuntarily, chilled to the heart. ‘Do not touch me,’ she said. ‘You do not know who and what I am.’

‘I ask to know nothing,’ he cried vehemently. ‘If there is any secret in your past life that might

divide us, hide it from me. Do you think I am going to bring the scrutiny of a detective to bear upon the antecedents of the woman I love? Blindly I give my happiness and my honour into your keeping. I see you, and love you for what you are—not for what evil fortune may have made you in the past.'

'You do not know the weight of your words,' she answered sadly. 'I thank you with all my heart for your confidence, for your love; but that which you think you wish can never be. It is best for us to part this very day, this very moment. Let us shake hands, Colonel Benyon, and say farewell.'

'Not till you have told me your reasons,' the Colonel cried imperiously. 'I may know those, at least.'

'I do not recognise your right to question me. I cannot explain my reasons.'

'But I will know them,' he cried, seizing her wrist. 'I have been fooled by one woman; I will not be trifled with by another. I will know why you refuse to be my wife. Is it because you hate or despise me?'

'No, no, no; you *know* that it is not that!'

She looked at him piteously, with a look that said

as plainly as any words she could have spoken, 'You know that I love you.'

'Is it from any mistaken notion of fidelity to the dead?'

'No, it is not that. Yet, Heaven knows, I have reason to be faithful to the dead.'

'What is it, then? You must and shall tell me.'

'For pity's sake, spare me. You are torturing me, Colonel Benyon.'

'Give me your promise to be my wife, then, and I will not ask a question. There can be no strong reason enough to divide us, if you love me; and I think you do.'

'Heaven help me!' she sobbed, clasping her hands with a piteous gesture.

To Herbert Benyon those three words sounded like a confession. He was sure that she loved him, sure that his will must conquer hers in the end.

'Yes,' she cried passionately, 'I do love you. Nothing could excuse such an admission from my lips but the knowledge that in this hour we part for ever. I do love you, Colonel Benyon; but there is nothing in this world that would induce me to become your wife, even if you knew the worst I can tell,

and were yet willing to take me, which you would not be.'

'You are wrong,' he exclaimed with an oath. 'There is nothing you can tell me that can change my resolution, or diminish my love.'

'Do not promise so rashly,' she answered, ashy pale, and with tremulous lips.

He drew her to the old granite tomb, and persuaded her to sit down beside him, seeing that she was nearly fainting.

'My love, I do not wish to be cruel,' he said tenderly. 'I do not seek to lift the veil of the past. I am content to love you blindly, foolishly, if you like. I will do anything to prove my devotion, will shape the whole course of my future life for your happiness. There is nothing in the world I would not sacrifice for your sake. Be generous, for your part, dearest. Say that you will be my wife, or give me some adequate reason for your denial.'

She did not answer him immediately. There was a silence of some moments, and then she said in a low voice:

'You have a friend to whom you are very much attached, Colonel Benyon, a friend who is almost as dear to you as a brother. I have heard you say that.'

‘What, Hammersley? Yes, certainly; Hammersley is a dear good fellow; but what has he to do with my marrying as I please? I should not consult him about *that*.’

‘You were talking the other night of that guilty creature—his wife.’

‘Yes, I have spoken to you about his wife.’

‘You have—in terms of reprobation which were well deserved. Have pity upon me, Colonel Benyon—I am that wretched woman!’

She had slipped from the tombstone to the turf beside it, and remained there, half crouching, half kneeling, in her utter abasement, with her face hidden.

‘You!’ exclaimed the Colonel, in a thick voice. ‘You!’

The blow seemed almost to crush him. He felt for the moment stupefied, stunned. He had been prepared for anything but this.

‘I am that wretched woman. I do not know if there is the shadow of excuse for my sin in the story of my life; but, at any rate, it is best that you should know it. George Champney and I were engaged to be married long before I saw Mr. Hammersley; and when he went to India, we were pledged to wait till he should come back and make me his wife. We had

known each other from childhood ; and I cannot tell you how dearly I loved him. It seems a mockery now to speak of this when I have not even been faithful to his memory ; but I did love him. I have mourned him as truly as ever any man was lamented upon this earth. From the first my father was opposed to our engagement, and my stepmother, a very worldly woman, set her face against it most resolutely. But we braved their displeasure, and held our own in spite of them. It was only when George was gone that their persecution became almost unendurable to me. I need not enter into details. Captain Champney had been away more than two years when I first met Mr. Hammersley. We were forbidden to write to each other ; and I had suffered unspeakable anxiety about him in that time. It was only in some indirect manner that I ever had news of him. When Mr. Hammersley first proposed to me, I refused him decisively ; but then followed a weary time in which I was tormented by my stepmother, and even by my father, who was influenced by her in this business. I do not think any man can understand the kind of domestic persecution which women are subject to—the daily reproach, the incessant worry. But I went through this ordeal. It was only when my father

brought home a newspaper containing the announcement of George Champney's death that my courage gave way. They let me alone for some time after this, let me indulge my grief unmolested ; and then, one day, the old arguments, the familiar reproaches, began again ; and in an hour of fatal weakness, worn out in body and mind—for I had been very ill for a long time after that bitter blow—I yielded.'

She paused for a little ; but the Colonel did not speak. He sat upon the granite tomb, looking seaward with haggard eyes, motionless as a statue, the living image of despair. He could have borne anything but this.

'You know the rest. No, you can never know how I suffered. The false announcement in the paper had been an error, common enough in those days, Captain Champney told me, when he came upon me one summer morning near Trewardell like a ghost. He had heard of the report in India, and had written to a common friend of ours, entreating her to let me know the truth ; whether she had attempted to do so, and had been in some manner prevented by my father or my stepmother, I cannot tell. Another Champney had been killed. The mistake was only the insertion of the wrong initials ; but it was a fatal error for us

two. He came to me to remind me of my promise ; came determined to take me away from my husband. I cannot speak of the events that came afterwards. There was no such thing as happiness possible for either of us. We were not wicked enough to be happy in spite of our sin. You know how they found George Champney lying dead upon the sands at Blankenburg one bright September morning. After that I had a dangerous illness, during which I was taken to a Belgian convent, by my husband's influence, I believe, where I was tenderly nursed till I recovered. They knew my story, those spotless nuns, and yet were kind to me. I stayed with them as a boarder for a year after—after Mr. Hammersley obtained his divorce ; and it was there I learned to nurse the sick. I was not destitute ; a sister of my mother's, knowing my position, settled a small annuity upon me ; and on that I have lived ever since. Six months ago I was seized with a yearning to see the place where the most tranquil days of my life had been spent. I knew that Mr. Hammersley was living abroad ; and I fancied that I ran no risk of recognition in returning to this neighbourhood. I knew how much misery and illness had changed me since I left Trewardell. It was a foolish fancy, no doubt ; but I, who have

nothing human left to love, may be forgiven for a weak attachment to familiar places. I came to Penjudah, thinking that I should find plenty of work here of the kind I wanted. I had no intention of coming any nearer to Trewardell, where I must, of course, run considerable risk of being recognised; but when Dr. Matson urged me to come to you the temptation was too strong for me, and I came to see the dear old place once more. That is the end of my story; and now, Colonel Benyon, I have but one word more to say—Farewell!’

She rose from the ground, and was going to leave him; but he detained her.

‘You have almost broken my heart,’ he said; ‘but there is nothing in this world can change my love for you. I still ask you to be my wife. I promise to cherish you with a love that shall blot out the memory of your past.’

She shook her head sadly.

‘It can never be,’ she answered; ‘I am not vile enough to trade upon your weakness or your generosity. Let me be faithful to the dead, and loyal to you. Once more, good-bye.’

‘Will nothing I can say prevail with you?’

‘Nothing. I shall always honour and revere you

as the most generous of men ; but you and I must never meet after to-day.'

He pleaded with her a little longer, trying by every possible argument to vanquish her resolution ; but his endeavours were all in vain. He knew that she loved him ; he felt that he was doomed to lose her.

And so at last she left him, sitting in the quiet burial-ground, in the pale winter sunshine, with all the glory of the Atlantic before him, and the stillness of a desert round about. Even after she had left him he determined upon making one more attempt to win her. He found out the place where she lived, and went to that humble alley in the early dusk, bent upon seeing her once more, upon pleading his cause more calmly, more logically, than it had been possible for him to do in the first heat of his passion. He found the house, and a very civil good-natured woman, who told him that Mrs. Chapman had left Penjudah two hours before, for good. She had gone abroad, the woman said.

'To Belgium, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir, that was the name of the place.'

As soon as he was strong enough Colonel Benyon went to Belgium, where he spent a couple of months

searching for Flora Hammersley in all the convents. It was a long wearisome search ; but he went through with it patiently to the end, persevering until he found a quiet little conventual retreat six miles from Louvain, where boarders were admitted. It was the place where she had been. His search was ended ; and the woman he loved had been buried in the tiny convent cemetery just a week before he came there. After this there was nothing left for the Colonel but to go back to India to the old familiar life. It was only his closest friends who ever perceived the change in him ; but, although he never spoke of his trouble, those who did thoroughly know him, knew that he had suffered some recent heart-wound, and that the stroke had been a heavy one.

CHAPTER I

THE ZOOPHYTE'S REVENGE

THE NOOPHYTES' REVENGE

CHAPTER I.

HIS name was Reginald Ravenscroft—rather a pretty name, as he used to say himself in a plaintive manner, if any one would have been so good as to call him by it—but he had been surnamed the Zoophyte by his brother officers in the Queen's Trumpeters, of which favourite corps he had been captain—the Zoophyte, ordinarily abbreviated for convenience into the Zoo.

This sobriquet had been bestowed upon Captain Ravenscroft on account of a certain easiness—not to say laziness—of disposition which formed the most salient feature in his character. In all their experience of him—and he had been a member of that crack regiment for some ten years—the Queen's Trumpeters had never seen Reginald Ravenscroft in any other than that placid and lamblike condition which was his natural temperament. He had had his trials in those years, of course—petty annoyances and small vexations, insolent letters from tradesmen and attor-

neys, aggravating blunders on the part of his body-servant, refusals to cash up from his relatives—vexations which would have thrown other men into raging passions, and sent them stamping about their quarters in a state of temporary lunacy; but they had no more discomposing effect upon Captain Ravenscroft than if he had indeed been one of those strange dabs of gelatinous matter which one sees sticking to the rocks at low tide. He swore, it is true; indeed, his *répertoire* of bad language was considerably in advance of that of his fellows, being richly garnished with the choicest flowers from Billingsgate and Seven-Dials, and strengthened by some very original blasphemies of his own composition; but the Queen's Trumpeters declared it was the funniest thing in the world to hear him give utterance to a lengthened string of blackguardisms which would have astonished any rough in St. Giles's, in the mildest tones, and with a most perfect placidity of face and manner. People were very fond of him, although, it must be freely admitted, he had never been known to be of very much use to any of his fellow-creatures. The idea of doing any one a service never entered his sluggish brain; but, on the other hand, he never gave offence to any human being. So people liked him

for being good-tempered and agreeable, and freely forgave him his uselessness.

He was very handsome. This fact may have had some influence upon the minds of his acquaintance, for his good looks were of an eminently pleasing and conciliating type. He had a nose that was almost as straight and delicately chiselled as the nose of a Greek statue—Pericles or Alcibiades—a pale complexion—which his female acquaintance called interesting, but which he himself described as bilious—dreamy gray eyes with long black lashes, the most expressive eyebrows, and a low broad forehead, crowned with crisply waving dark hair. There was a want of force and firmness about the mouth and chin; but a moustache concealed the weakness of one feature, and a beard gave form and character to the other; so, upon the whole, the Zoophyte was about as handsome a man as you would be likely to see in any given day's journey.

He was by no means a fop; but he was quite aware that he was good-looking, and would state the fact, in a business-like manner, in any discussion of his affairs and prospects. He dressed well, of course. To belong to the Queen's Trumpeters and not to dress well would have been an impossibility. The

newest combinations of colour in cravats, the last designs in socks, the most novel devices in dress-shirts, were scarcely fresh enough for the Trumpeters; while the amount to which every one of these gentlemen became annually indebted to his tailor and his bootmaker would have been a fair income for a moderate-sized family. The Trumpeters were extravagant, and prided themselves on their extravagance.

From his earliest youth upwards debt and difficulty had been, as it were, the normal condition of the Zoophyte: difficulty for other people, that is to say; for his debts had never been a cause of disturbance to his own lymphatic temper. It was his habit to allow matters to go on till they became utterly desperate, when he would coolly hand over to his wealthy sister, Lady Talmash Brading, a tangled mass of correspondence from tradesmen and attorneys, not one letter of which had ever been replied to, and leave her and her solicitors to settle the business exactly as they pleased.

She was a very kind sister, and had paid Reginald Ravenscroft's debts so often, that it had become in a manner an established thing that she should pay them. He scarcely thanked her. 'What the deuce

has she to do with her money?' he would say, when any one lauded her generosity; 'she is so preposterously rich, that I consider I do her an actual favour in relieving her of a little of her superfluous cash. It's like a periodical blood-letting. She would be subject to a kind of financial apoplexy, if it were not for me—would expire of a golden plethora.'

There are limits, however, to human patience, and Lady Talmash Brading was beginning to grow very tired of her brother Reginald's periodical insolvencies—the tailors' and boot-makers' and shirt-makers' and perfumers' bills; the heavy accounts from elegant purveyors in St. James's-street, who pleasantly combined the daily necessities of stationery with the glittering temptations of the jeweller, so that the idle swell, being smitten by the effect of some curious monogram on his note-paper, might have it repeated in emeralds and diamonds, or ruby and onyx, as the case may be, on his scarf-pin and shirt-studs, a locket or a pair of sleeve-links; the fearful list of goods supplied by crack saddlers and spur-makers—the endless catalogue of expensive articles which had been necessary to the existence of Captain Ravenscroft during two or three years of that gentleman's harmless career. Lady Talmash

Brading was beginning to grow weary of these things.

‘It is always the same, Reginald,’ she said; ‘or if there is any change, it is for the worse. I can’t comprehend it. You can’t possibly be always wanting the same things—watch-chains and rings and studs and pins. Those things don’t wear out.’

‘No, my dear Leonora; but a fellow loses them, and gives them away, and so on. If a fellow one likes sees a thing of that kind on one’s dressing-table and takes a fancy to it, how can one do less than offer it to him? Studs and breast-pins are the small change of life, like fourpenny-bits. And then they go out of fashion—they get known; you couldn’t expect a man to wear a thing he had had over a month. I’ve a vague recollection of having read somewhere that Heliogabalus would as soon have thought of wearing his shoes twice as a ring—and you wouldn’t have an officer in the Queen’s Own Trumpeters less particular than a dirty Roman emperor.’

Lady Talmash Brading only shrugged her shoulders impatiently in reply to this remonstrance. She was walking up and down her splendid drawing-rooms in Grosvenor-square, while the Zoophyte lounged at his ease in one satin-covered arm-chair,

with his legs stretched before him on another, and a *Morning Post* spread out upon his knees. He had a glass stuck in one eye, through which he lazily surveyed the impetuous movements of his sister.

‘I have no common patience,’ she exclaimed at last. ‘If you took the least trouble to regulate your affairs, one wouldn’t mind so much; but you don’t—you allow matters to go on till they can go no farther, and then just fling a mass of bills over to me, and expect me to pay them. I don’t believe you even know what you owe.’

‘I confess, my dear sister, that I have not even an approximate idea of the amount. But why distress yourself upon the subject? the affair is such a mere bagatelle to you. Why not hand the documents over to your steward, and dismiss the business from your mind altogether.’

‘That is not my way of doing things, Reginald,’ answered his sister severely.

‘Unhappily not, my dear creature. You are so awfully business-like.’

‘If you were a little more business-like, a little more reasonable, Reginald, I should have some hope of you. If you would only remember that my patience may be exhausted, and learn to economise—’

‘Economise in the Queen’s Trumpeters! Not to be done, my dear soul. I believe there was a man once in the corps who tried to live within his income, and they did something dreadful to him—filled his bed with empty soda-water bottles with the wires on, or tarred and feathered him, or tried him by court-martial, or told him he’d better sell out, or something ferocious in that way. No, Leonora, as long as I remain a Trumpeter, I shall do my duty.’

‘Then I should think the sooner you cease to be a Trumpeter, the better. If you mean always to go on as you have been going on for the last ten years, you’d better sell out at once.’

‘Do you really think so?’ murmured the Zoophyte, staring at her reflectively through his glass. ‘Well, the question is open to consideration, certainly. I should realise a couple of thousand or so by the sale of my commission; and I never had two thousand pounds of ready money in my life. Two thousand in actual bank-notes and gold!—there must be a good deal of spending in that.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Lady Talmash Brading. ‘You don’t mean that you would really be so mad as to leave the army?’

‘Why not? Weren’t you recommending it just

now? I could live with you. You couldn't refuse shelter to such a harmless fellow as I. I could stroll about the place all day when you were down at Brading, keeping an eye upon the gardeners, and seeing they didn't waste their time—I should be invaluable in that way. Or I might marry Miss Corks.'

'Marry Miss Corks!' cried Lady Talmash Brading, with supreme disdain.

'What! you wouldn't like a brewer's daughter to call you sister-in-law? But upon my word I might do a worse thing for myself: she's a very nice girl—a pretty girl too—and will have a hundred thousand for her fortune. And I think she'd have me. I really don't see why you should set your face against Miss Corks.'

'If you want to disgrace me in the sight of all Brading by a match of that kind, pray do so; but from the hour in which you do so, you may consider that you and I are strangers—I would never speak to you again.'

'Hard lines, rather, Leonora, when such a marriage would make my fortune. But under those circumstances you can't, of course, object to pay my debts occasionally.'

'I do object to pay them ever again. I will allow

you two hundred a year; and if you can't contrive to live upon that and your pay, you must look elsewhere for assistance. It will be no use appealing to me.'

'My dear Leonora, this is positively inhuman—that allusion to my pay is the very essence of mockery. As if my pay had ever counted for anything! O, I see that I must marry Miss Corks.'

'Do,' said Lady Talmash Brading, 'at your peril.'

CHAPTER II.

SHE was a proud woman, Lady Talmash Brading. She had begun life as an acknowledged beauty, and the only daughter of a Somersetshire gentleman of small landed estate ; so small indeed, having dwindled down from the fair proportions of the past, that Leonora Ravenscroft felt it incumbent upon her to make a good marriage. She had married young, and she had been twice married—first to Mr. Prothero, the great shipbuilder, a man of untold wealth ; and then to Lord Talmash Brading, of Brading Park, Yorkshire, and Talmash Towers, Leicestershire—and she had been twice a widow. She had more estates than she could count on the fingers of one of her pretty plump hands ; she had coal-mines in the north, and a tin-mine in the west ; she had the superbly-appointed house in Grosvenor-square, furnished by the lamented Prothero ; the dainty little villa at Cowes, designed and built by the never-too-much-to-be-regretted Talmash ; and to inherit all

these things she had only one daughter, a fair-haired girl of twelve, born to her a few days before that fatal accident in the hunting-field which caused her second husband's death. Happily for the Zoophyte, this fair-haired young heiress, Julia Talmash Brading, was very fond of her uncle Regy. Not that he had ever done anything to deserve her affection. He existed. That was the highest form of exertion of which this member of the coralline tribe was capable.

After that interview in Grosvenor-square,—which might have been a stormy one, had it been any more possible for one person to sustain the whole burden of a tempest than it is possible for one person to perform a duet,—Lady Talmash Brading vowed a terrible vow that she would never again pay her brother's debts. There were limits to a sister's generosity, she said, and he had overstepped those limits. It would be a wrong done to her precious Julia, if she were to go on being imposed upon in this manner. Granted that she was rich, the wealth of all the Lydian kings, from Candaules downwards, would scarcely have been enough to stand against such extravagance as Reginald Ravenscroft's. He was now clear of debt. He was set on his pins once more, to use the homely language of my lady's soli-

citor, and this last setting him on his pins had been a more expensive business than usual. She would allow him two hundred a year—fifty pounds a quarter, paid with unerring regularity—and she would do no more.

She kept her word. The Queen's Own Trumpeters were ordered off to Ireland about this time, much to the Zoophyte's aggravation. If that invertebrate creature could feel strongly upon any point, that point was his attachment to the metropolis. To the profoundest depths of his nature he was a Cockney. Pall Mall and St. James's-street, with a rare excursus as far as Rotten Row, formed his world. And to be removed to barbarous and unknown regions beyond the reach of this world was the greatest hardship the Zoophyte had ever been called upon to endure. But even this trial could not arouse him to loud lamentations or violent demonstration of any kind. He was heard to utter faint moaning noises like the bleating of a distressed lamb; he swore a little harder than usual in his meek voice, and indeed invented one or two choice forms of execration under this unwonted pressure. He neglected his diet, was seen to take his *potage à l'Italien* without grated Parmesan, and forgot to grumble at the non-appear-

ance of those preliminary natives which he was wont to sacrifice to the gods, as it were, before beginning his dinner. Greater things might have befallen him unheeded in the anguish of this Hibernian exile.

They departed, however, the Queen's Own Trumpeters, in all their supernal splendour, and the Zoophyte had the comfort of knowing that he left the great city without leaving a creditor behind him.

'It's almost melancholy,' he said; 'I feel as if I had cut myself off from human sympathy. If I were to die suddenly, who the deuce would be sorry for me?'

The Trumpeters were in Ireland for the greater part of a year, and were then transferred to a small garrison town in Lancashire—rather a dreary place, where it might be supposed almost impossible for any man to get into debt. The Zoophyte received his quarterly allowance punctually, and accepted it meekly. He had never been known to refuse money; but he accepted it under mental protest. He found the quarterly remittance rather handy for the payment of his small losses at billiards and whist; and on one occasion, his wandering fancies being caught by a breast-pin exposed for sale in the chief jeweller's of the small garrison town, he bought and paid for the bauble on the spot. It was about the

only transaction in his life in which he had ever employed ready-money, and he informed his friends afterwards that it afforded him a novel sensation.

‘I felt that it was low,’ he said, ‘decidedly low. I felt myself sunk considerably in the social scale. The idea of entering into a detail of that kind with a tradesman fellow, instead of paying him through my lawyer, in a gentlemanly manner!’

While the Zoophyte endured his exile in Ireland and Lancashire, Lady Talmash Brading was for the greater part of the time travelling in Switzerland and Italy with her ‘precious Julia.’ For nearly two years, therefore, she had heard very little of her brother, who had a marked aversion to letter-writing.

‘My sister’s in Italy, you see,’ he would remark plaintively, ‘and people who are away from England are so confoundedly selfish, they expect one to tell them such a lot in one’s letters—so I find the only plan is not to write at all.’

The brother and sister had not met since that morning in Grosvenor-square when Leonora had vowed a vow that she would never pay Reginald’s debts again, when Lady Talmash Brading and her daughter returned from the Continent, and came straight down to Brading Park.

It was midsummer, and the park and gardens were in all their June splendour: the orchard-houses full of rosy velvet-skinned peaches, ruddy nectarines and golden apricots; the kitchen-gardens running over with mellow-flavoured peas, wonderful cucumbers, and late asparagus, to say nothing of two or three acres of strawberry-beds, where the fresh green leaves lay lightly on beds of tan or straw, and where a weed would have been as difficult to find as the rarest orchid in the Botanical Dictionary. The Zoophyte was fond of Brading Park; he was especially fond of the kitchen-gardens. He liked to stroll with Julia through the hothouses in the drowsy noontide, stopping now and then to finger the ponderous bunches of grapes with a thoughtful touch, anon to gaze dreamily on a row of pines, or to pluck a peach that seemed ready to drop into his mouth. He liked Brading Park—the house was a nice sleepy old place, with capacious sofas and easy-chairs in every available corner; sunny nooks in deep south-east windows, where a man might doze over his morning paper; and in all the galleries and reception-rooms thick Axminster carpets that muffled the sound of passing footsteps. The Zoophyte liked Brading—he had his own particular suite of rooms there, and

free quarters—‘the run of his teeth,’ as a coarse-minded brother officer had called it. Of course his military engagements had prevented his wearing out his welcome.

Brading seemed very rural and homelike and pleasant to Lady Talmash Brading and her daughter, after those uncomfortable Italian hotels, with their gaudy gilded chambers, and eternal clocks and candelabra. Julia skipped about the gardens in an ecstasy.

‘I think there have never been such flowers or such fruit as there are this year, mamma,’ she exclaimed. ‘There’s only one thing I want to make me quite happy.’

‘And what is that, my dearest love?’

‘Uncle Regy. He would so enjoy the peaches—you know how fond he is of peaches; and it is so nice to see him eat them—peeling them so slowly and deliberately with those lazy white hands of his.’

‘I don’t think there is much chance of your seeing your uncle,’ replied Lady Talmash Brading; ‘I had occasion to be very much displeased with him when last we met—we had some words, in fact.’

‘Had words, mamma? Do you mean to say that uncle Regy could possibly quarrel with any one?’

‘Well, no, I don’t know that Reginald said very much himself, but I said a great deal to him. I was in a passion, Julia, and spoke my mind very freely.’

‘What had he been doing, mamma?’

‘O, the usual thing—getting over head and ears in debt, and then coolly flinging his embarrassments upon me.’

The fair young heiress scarcely seemed shocked at this. She only shook her head in a deprecating way.

‘We are so rich, mamma dear,’ she said, ‘we can afford to pay poor uncle Regy’s debts now and then. Military men always get into debt. Grandpapa ought not to have put him into such an expensive regiment as the Queen’s Trumpeters.’

‘That’s all very well, Julia, but it has been going on a great deal too long; and when last I saw your uncle, I told him that I should never pay his debts again; upon which he had the impertinence to threaten me that he would marry Miss Corks.’

‘What, mamma! the daughter of the fat brewer in Brading?’

‘Yes, Julia; and there would be a disgrace. Mr. Corks’ father was butler to my husband’s grandfather, and the son began business in the smallest

way in the world. They say he's enormously rich now, but a most ignorant vulgar person. He's very popular in Brading, however, among a certain set, and I believe there are people who visit him.'

'Miss Corks rides to hounds, mamma—I've seen her when we've been to see them break covert—rather a nice-looking girl, with wavy brown hair, and a rosy face. It's a pity she's too common for uncle Regy to marry her.'

'Too common—yes, I should think so. The idea of the Corks tribe fastening on us!'

'But they are not a very large tribe, mamma; Miss Corks is an only child, isn't she?'

'I believe so,' Lady Talmash answered coldly; 'but that doesn't make the least difference. The thing is not to be heard of.'

The next day was cloudless but sultry; not a breath stirred the roses on the lawn, or rippled the blue bosom of the lake. Lady Talmash and her daughter sat in the garden after luncheon, in a favourite spot under a mighty plane-tree. They had work with them and books, but neither of them worked or read. It was the laziest possible weather.

'Just the sort of weather that uncle Regy likes, mamma,' said Julia, 'when he can lie on the grass

and bask. How he would enjoy Brading this delicious midsummer! I am so sorry to think of him in a nasty dull town in Lancashire.'

She had not any prolonged cause for sorrow; for looking up at this very moment, she perceived the object of her thoughts walking slowly across the lawn towards her with the air of having left the house half an hour or so before for an afternoon stroll. It was the Zoophyte's celebrated manner, placid and imperturbable to the last degree.

My lady was fairly taken aback by this apparition.

'Why, Reginald,' she exclaimed, 'what, in heaven's name, brought you here?'

'The ten-o'clock express—leaves King's-cross at ten—a capital train. How d'ye do, Leonora?—how d'ye do, July? What a handsome girl you're growing! You take after your unfortunate uncle, you see, and not the Talmash Bradings. Your father might give you rank, my love, but he couldn't give you beauty. How sweet the old place looks—such a warm sleepiness about it!'

The Zoophyte dropped himself into one of the garden arm-chairs, and stretched out his legs with a complacent air. There was dust upon his boots. He had actually walked half a mile or so.

‘I find myself getting fat,’ he said, in explanation of this unusual circumstance; ‘so whenever I have an opportunity, I go in for violent exercise. I’ve walked from the station. I’ve got some luggage and that kind of thing there—perhaps you’ll be good enough to send a trap for it. How are the grapes this year, July?’

‘Julia,’ said her mother rather stiffly, ‘go and tell one of the grooms to fetch your uncle’s portmanteau.’

‘But, my dear Leonora, it isn’t a portmanteau, it’s luggage—large military cases and that kind of thing. You’d better send the biggest vehicle you’ve got. There’s a good lot of it.’

My lady opened her fine eyes to their widest extent.

‘You mean to honour me with an unusually long visit, it seems,’ she said. ‘I thought the Trumpeters were in Lancashire.’

‘The Trumpeters are in Lancashire.’

‘And you have got leave of absence, I suppose?’

‘No, my dear Leonora; I have placed myself in a position to be independent of leaves of absence. It’s a deuced unpleasant thing asking for leave.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Simply that I have sold out. I disposed of my commission last week. The Trumpeters are still a very fine corps, but the flower of their flock is lost to them,’ added the Zoophyte, twirling his moustache.

‘Sold out!’ cried Lady Talmash Brading, aghast, ‘sold out!’

‘Yes, my dear Leonora. It was your own suggestion. “If you find the regiment too expensive,” you said, with that stern common sense which has always distinguished you, “you ought to sell out.” I did find the regiment too expensive, and I have sold out. It was the only resource left me for paying my debts, in fact, since you had sworn never to pay them again.’

‘Your debts! Do you mean to say that you were in debt again?’

‘My dear Leonora, do you suppose that there is no such thing as growth in a tailor’s bill? Do you imagine that one’s tobacconist’s account is not subject to the common laws of progression? I had a two years’ accumulation of debt to wipe off—my creditors were becoming clamorous, judging by the number of lawyers’ letters which I received but did not read—and my only way of making a clean slate was to sell my commission.’

‘It is shameful,’ exclaimed my lady, in a passion, ‘it is positively infamous! In spite of the two hundred a year I have allowed you!’

‘That two hundred a year was only an incentive to extravagance. It afforded me occasional supplies of ready-money. Now I can do without ready-money. In short, the two hundred a year demoralised me.’

Lady Talmash gave an impatient sigh. She rose from her seat, and began to pace up and down the shady patch of grass under the plane-tree, as it was her habit to do when unpleasantly excited. Julia Brading twisted the cord and tassels of her little silk apron, and looked at her uncle with a piteous expression of countenance, longing to make him an offer of her pocket-money, or to do something for his consolation. The Zoophyte was the only person unmoved—he stretched his long legs to their fullest extent upon a neighbouring bench, dived into the pocket of his light overcoat, and produced therefrom a splendid seal-skin cigar-case, almost big enough for a small portmanteau. Everything appertaining to the Zoophyte was upon a large scale, and splendid in colour and texture.

‘You don’t mind smoke out of doors, I know,

Nora,' he said blandly, and began to puff away at an enormous Rio Hondo cigar.

His sister did not even condescend to notice the inquiry.

'What is to become of you?' she exclaimed at last, 'that is the question—what is to become of you?'

'My dearest Leonora, I think that is a question that may fairly be relegated to the remote future. I am naturally a cautious man, and am not in a hurry to make any desperate plunge in life. In the mean time, I can live with you—there is no objection to that, I suppose?'

'Of course not, uncle Regy,' cried Julia; 'you can live with us.—He can live with us for ever and ever, can't he, mamma? You know how I was wishing for him only yesterday.'

'My darling Julia, you are a child, and don't know what you are talking about. So far as this place goes, there are your uncle's rooms, and he will always be welcome to occupy them, as long as he pleases. But at his age a man must do something and be something. It's preposterous to suppose that he can go on dawdling the rest of his life away here.'

The Zoophyte yawned, and murmured that, in his opinion, no man ought to be expected to work after he was nine-and-twenty. Mr. Ravenscroft's nine-and-twentieth birthday had just gone by.

The end of it all was, that he stopped at Brading Park, and strolled in the hothouses and ate ripe peaches, and played billiards with his niece. A wagon-load of chests and portmanteaus came from the railway station, and from these receptacles the Zoophyte produced the greatest marvels in the way of dressing-gowns and morning-coats and waistcoats and cravats that had ever been seen at Brading, to say nothing of a whole arsenal of meerschaum pipes, and a dainty little library of light French literature, with which, and with numerous splendid despatch-boxes, dressing-cases, photograph-albums, perfume-cabinets, and tobacco-chests, he beautified and adorned his rooms—making them so comfortable, in fact, that it was hard to imagine he would ever be able to tear himself away from them.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN RAVENSCROFT—the rule, once a captain always a captain, was allowed to hold good in his case—Captain Ravenscroft had been a year at Brading Park, and he had as yet made no attempt at a new beginning in life. Sometimes, when his sister questioned him upon the subject, he told her that he was thinking it over, or that he was looking about him : but nothing came either of his thinking or his looking. There he was, placid and even-tempered to an extreme degree, the idol of the servants, the delight of Lady Talmash Brading's visitors, but nevertheless an encumbrance and responsibility to the lady herself.

Again and again she returned to the charge. Could he not do something—at the Bar, for instance ? But the Zoophyte told her, with one of his lazily expressive shrugs, that by the time he had got through the preliminary business of the Bar, he would be quite an old man. There was commerce, then, sug-

gested Lady Talmash Brading—the scions of many noble families had entered the commercial arena lately. Could he not do something in sugar-broking, or ship-building, or something of that kind?

The Zoophyte pondered, and thought that he might perhaps travel in coals—there was not much commercial genius required for travelling in coals. Lady Talmash Brading gave a little shriek of horror.

‘Travelling in coals! Upon my word, Reginald, you are incorrigible.’

‘Then, if you are tired of me, let me marry Miss Corks,’ said the Zoophyte; ‘she’s a very nice girl, and I really think she’d have me.’

‘Marry Miss Corks, by all means,’ cried his sister indignantly; ‘but please consider yourself a stranger to me from the hour of your marriage.’

‘O, as far as that goes,’ replied the Zoophyte coolly, ‘I don’t suppose Miss Corks would have me unless you did the civil; a girl with a hundred thousand pounds won’t enter a family to be despised—it isn’t likely.’

‘And it isn’t likely that I shall receive a brewer’s daughter, whose grandfather was a servant in this house!’ returned Lady Talmash Brading.

‘I suppose not; but it’s rather hard upon me,’

said the Zoo, with a faint moan; 'she really is a very nice girl.'

Mary Corks certainly was a nice girl, and a pretty girl into the bargain—a girl with frank innocent blue eyes, a pert little nose slightly *retroussée*, a perfect rosebud of a mouth, and all manner of artless winning ways that had gone straight home to the Zoophyte's heart. He *had* a heart, listless and inane as he seemed, and Mary Corks reigned therein. She had been very well educated, and, although her father and mother did make sad havoc of the Queen's English, was quite a lady: a good dutiful daughter too, fond and respectful in her demeanour towards the simple elderly people, and never ashamed of their shortcomings.

Yes, she was a dear little English maiden, and the Zoophyte was very fond of her. He had met her at subscription balls in Brading, and had danced with her a conspicuous number of times; he had ridden his quiet hack to covert, and seen her in her dark-blue riding-habit and coquettish hat with a scarlet feather. He had scraped acquaintance with old Corks one market-day—Corks had a profound reverence for the Talmash Brading family—and had been invited to dine at the big brand-new red-brick villa just out-

side Brading ; a pile of building of the gothic order, with library and billiard-room, smoking-room, and conservatories jutting out from the main edifice, and a quadrangular mass of stabling that was like a baronial castle.

Mr. Corks himself inhabited a certain cosy little chamber which looked on the poultry-yard—a room that had been intended for the housekeeper, and then discarded as too small. Here the great brewer spent the best part of his life, smoking his clay-pipe, or studying his banker's-book, or reading the newspapers, in a pleasant solitude. He called the room the Snuggery, and whenever Mary Corks had a favour to ask, she used to repair to this chamber.

Captain Ravenscroft dined a great many times at the Battlements—Mr. Corks' gothic villa was called the Battlements—and he heard Mary sing and play, and played billiards with her after dinner in the great gothic billiard-room, with its big brass lamps, and open oak roof, and generally ecclesiastic appearance. Sometimes there was a party, consisting of professional people from Brading, with a sprinkling of the smaller country gentry ; sometimes there was no one ; but there was always an excellent dinner and first-rate wines, and the Zoophyte liked the quiet

homely evenings best. He didn't mind Mr. Corks' idiomatic English a bit. He thought Corks a hearty honest old fellow, and really liked him.

'I wish I had a fortune,' he said to himself sometimes despondently; 'I shall seem such a mercenary scoundrel if I propose to that girl.'

He did, however, propose to her. It wasn't possible to go on very long in her society and not tell her how much he loved her. Those winning ways of hers quite knocked him over, to use his own expression. So one evening in the billiard-room he was taken off his guard, somehow, and before he knew what he was doing, he had asked her to be his wife.

He had to press the question a little before he could get any decisive answer. At first she would only trifle with the billiard-balls with downcast eyes, evading all his questions; but at last she confessed that he was not quite indifferent to her—that she liked him just a little—well, more than a little—that she loved him very much.

'But there is papa to be thought of,' she said, looking up at him shyly with her pretty blue eyes. 'I don't think he'd ever consent; in fact, I'm sure he wouldn't, unless—'

‘Unless what, darling?’ (The Zoophyte had his arm round her waist by this time, and was looking down at the fair young face with an air of proprietorship.) ‘Unless what, dearest?’

‘Unless Lady Talmash Brading were to use her influence with him. Papa has such a high opinion of her; and perhaps if he thought she wished it very much, he might give way.’

The Zoophyte looked very blank for a moment, but it was only for a moment.

‘She shall use her influence, Mary,’ he cried resolutely. He felt quite desperate—felt as if he could drag his sister to the Battlements by main force, and make her sue to Mr. Corks; anything rather than lose this dear girl, who was looking at him so confidently.

‘Am I to tell papa?’ she faltered presently.

‘Well, yes, darling. It’s best to be all fair and above-board. Tell papa at once; and I’ll tell my sister, and we’ll see what she can do.’

He was not very hopeful, but still he thought his sister could never be so atrociously cruel as to stand between him and a hundred thousand pounds. It seemed incredible.

But when he came to make his appeal, he found

her obdurate. The idea of such an alliance was not to be tolerated for a moment.

‘*I use my influence to promote the match!*’ she exclaimed. ‘*I stoop to that vulgar brewer! you must be demented to think of such a thing, Reginald. People who have risen from nothing, at my very door — a girl whose grandfather was a servant!*’

‘She can’t help that, you see, Nora; and she’s a perfect lady, I give you my honour—as much a lady as Julia.’

Lady Talmash Brading gave a shriek.

‘Yes; and my poor precious Julia is to go through life with the disgrace of a brewery tacked to her name—is to make her entrance into the great world associated with BEER!’

‘What nonsense, Leonora! As if my wife’s connections need affect Julia! All you have to do is to be civil to old Corks, and tell him you’ll be glad to welcome his daughter as a member of your family. That kind of man sets such value upon rank, you’ll be able to wind him round your finger. And she really is the dearest girl in the world, Nora.’

‘It is not to be heard of!’ exclaimed the lady decisively.

A day or two after this, Captain Ravenscroft received another invitation to dine at the Battlements. He opined that this meant business, and made his appearance there in some trepidation. The dinner went off pleasantly enough. Mary was very silent, and blushed a great deal, without adequate provocation, but looked her prettiest. After dinner the Zoophyte would fain have strolled off to the conservatories or the billiard-room, according to his usual custom, but Mr. Corks stopped him.

‘I should like a word or two with you in my room, Captain,’ he said, in a very friendly tone. ‘Johnson, take a bottle of Lafitte to the Snuggery.’

The butler obeyed, and led the way, carrying a massive silver salver, with the claret and two clear bell-shaped glasses. It was a summer evening, and the Snuggery was warm, not to say stuffy. Even the open window only admitted an odour of live poultry; but the Zoophyte didn't mind this. He felt that his future was at stake.

‘Take some of that there claret,’ said the brewer. ‘It's a better sort than I usually give you, though I don't give you bad. But I thought you should have the best to-night,’ he added, with a chuckle.

They filled their glasses. The brewer drained

his at a draught; the Zoophyte sipped his wine in silence. He was very nervous.

‘My little girl has been a-telling of me something,’ Mr. Corks began,—‘something about you. Now, I want to know first and foremost, are you in earnest?’

‘Thoroughly in earnest—with all my heart and soul,’ replied the Zoophyte, with unwonted energy.

‘And it ain’t her money you’re after, hay?’ asked the brewer. ‘You like my little gal for her own sake?’

‘I love her so dearly, that I would marry her to-morrow if she hadn’t a penny.’

‘That’s all very fine. But how would you keep her if she hadn’t a penny, I should like to know? However, luckily she’ll have plenty. I can give her a handsome fortune without feeling the loss of the money. And I don’t care about her marrying a rich man. I’m not the sort of fellow that wants to join money to money. My father spent his life among the nobility, and he taught me a respect for rank. Money’s a very good thing in its way, but it’s all the better when it’s joined to rank. Now, all other points being agreeable, I shouldn’t mind my daughter being sister-in-law to Lady Talmash Brading. It would sound well—“My sister, Lady Talmash Brading,”

hay? You see, I'm a candid sort of a chap, and don't make any concealment of my feelings.'

Captain Ravenscroft bowed. It seemed pretty smooth sailing so far; but there were rocks and shoals ahead, no doubt.

'Now the question is,' said the brewer, 'does your sister know of this?'

'She does,' replied the Zoophyte gravely.

'And does she approve of it?'

The Zoophyte hesitated.

'I have no doubt that she will approve ultimately,' he said. 'She cannot fail to approve.'

'Cannot fail to fiddlestick!' cried Mr. Corks impatiently. 'I'm not a-going to let my girl marry into a grand family that will turn their noses up at her. If you expect to get my Mary, and my Mary's money, her ladyship must come here to me, and let me know that her heart goes with the business, and that she'll be a sister to my girl. There must be no shilly-shally about *that*. And now, Captain Ravenscroft, what may be the income upon which you intend to begin housekeeping?'

The Zoophyte was fain to confess that all his worldly wealth consisted of the two hundred per annum which his sister allowed him.

‘Well, upon my word, you’re a cool customer!’ cried the brewer, with a good-natured laugh that was very reassuring. ‘However, I’ll tell you what I’ll do with you. Let your sister allow you five hundred a year, and settle it upon you, so as she can’t change her mind—it won’t be much, but it’ll be something—and I’ll give my girl fifty thousand down on the nail; settled upon herself and her children after her, of course.’

‘Of course,’ replied the Zoophyte.

‘And let Lady Talmash Brading come to me in a friendly way, and talk the business over. I don’t want no hole-and-corner work. If my Mary enters a high family, she must enter it like a lady.’

Captain Ravenscroft promised that his sister should do all that was needful. And again he had that desperate feeling, that he would *make* her bow the knee before this resolute brewer rather than lose such a girl as Mary.

He went home that night not elated but grave. He knew that his sister was an obstinate woman, and that he had a difficult task before him. Early next morning he presented himself in her favourite room—a spacious sunny bow-windowed apartment, looking out upon the flower-garden. He presented him-

self before her, and stated his requirements in a business-like manner. It was a matter of life or death to him, he said finally. He would be a blighted man if he did not marry Mary Corks.

His eloquence was all wasted. Lady Talmash was obdurate. It was not the five hundred per annum, though the request was certainly a cool one. She might have strained a point to give him that, had he been about to make an appropriate marriage; but she would never receive Mary Corks. She would never degrade herself in the sight of the county by alliance with that upstart brewer. She was very angry, as she was wont to be when the Corks question was mooted, and she said a great deal.

The Zoophyte heard her with his usual placidity. Even a matter of life and death could not goad him into the display of much emotion. The interview was a long one, and he used the strongest arguments he could think of; but to the end he was mild and tranquil. At the very last he said:

‘Is that final, Leonora?’

‘Quite final.’

‘Then I may as well wish you good-bye. I shall leave the Park this afternoon.’

Lady Talmash looked surprised.

‘There is no occasion for that,’ she exclaimed. ‘I have no quarrel with you, Reginald. I am only inflexible upon the subject of Miss Corks. There is no occasion for you to go away.’

‘I beg your pardon, my dear Leonora. You have often reproached me with my want of energy—my disinclination to enter upon a new career. I begin to feel that your reproaches were well founded, and I have made my plans for placing myself in a position to earn my own living.’

‘Indeed! you surprise me, Reginald. This is rather a new idea, is it not?’

‘Well, yes; it is rather a new idea,’ answered the Zoophyte calmly.

‘And what line have you chosen? Anything in the commercial way?’

‘Yes; the business is commercial.’

‘Nothing horrid, I hope,’ cried Lady Talmash, with an alarmed look. ‘Not travelling in coals, or anything of that kind?’

‘O, no; there’s no travelling—it’s quite a stationary business, and clean. I really think I shall like it.’

‘You are very mysterious, Regy; you might just as well tell me frankly what you are going to do.’

‘I’ll tell you all about it, if I succeed. In any case, you must take it as a compliment that I am anxious to follow your advice.’

‘I suppose so; but I should like to have been more in your confidence. However, I daresay it’s all right. At any rate, I can tolerate anything sooner than your marrying Miss Corks.’

The Zoophyte smiled—it was scarcely a smiling matter, but he decidedly smiled.

‘I’m sorry you’re so prejudiced on that point,’ he said. ‘Good-bye.’

‘You’re going up to town by the next train?’

‘Well, no, not by the next—I’m going away very soon, though. You don’t mind my leaving the bulk of my luggage here, do you, Nora?’

‘Of course not. You can consider those rooms always your own.’

They shook hands, kissed each other even, a display of affection to which they were not particularly given, and parted. Captain Ravenscroft packed a portmanteau and carpet-bag, and carried them away with him in a Brading fly. He declined to avail himself of the Park stables for his exodus, and the Park servants said there had been a quarrel between the Captain and his sister.

'I don't know about that,' said one of the housemaids; 'I was cleaning the yellow room all the time they was a-talking in my lady's morning-room, and I didn't hear high words between 'em.'

'You'd never hear high words from the Captain,' answered the housekeeper; 'it isn't in him. But take my word for it there's been a quarrel, or the Captain wouldn't be going away all of a sudden like this.'

The Zoophyte contrived to evade any farewell between himself and Julia.

He was tender-hearted upon some subjects, and his niece was one of them.

CHAPTER IV.

FOR a fortnight Lady Talmash Brading heard nothing of her brother. In the depths of her heart she was glad that he was gone, though she dared not own as much to Julia, who sorely bemoaned uncle Regy's departure. The Corks affair was off: that was the grand point in the mind of Lady Talmash. She was not very well during that fortnight—had a slight attack of summer influenza, or hay fever, and took numerous mild sedatives and saline draughts furnished by the most courteous and sympathetic of provincial doctors. She was a prisoner in the house, therefore, and Julia stayed at home with her, and was not to be lured away by the brightest days. Towards the end of the fortnight Lady Talmash surprised her own maid looking at her once or twice in a curious way, as if there was some revelation she would like to make if she dared. The housekeeper, too, had a peculiar manner one morning when she held a conference

with her mistress. Once, too, Lady Talmash actually saw the butler—the grave elderly butler, who looked like a pillar of the state in his respectable solemnity—exchange a subdued grin with his subordinate, as if their minds were burdened with some common joke. The subordinate—as inferior in breeding to his chief—even gave a suppressed chuckle and splutter, and was fain to busy himself suddenly at the sideboard in order to hide his guilty countenance from Lady Talmash Brading's majesty.

‘Some vulgar village joke, no doubt,’ she thought; ‘but if that man laughs again, he must go.’

At last her ladyship was pronounced well enough to go out. She took longer to get well, of course, than a common person, and the Brading surgeon was as punctilious and solemn as if she had been at death's door.

‘You really might take an airing in your pony-carriage, my lady;’ and then he added in a strange downcast way, ‘but I wouldn't go far, I wouldn't expose myself to fatigue or worry just yet. A drive in the park, now, would be best.’

‘I hate prowling about the park,’ my lady answered impatiently. ‘If I go out at all, I shall go for a long drive. A park ought to be twenty miles round

at least for it to be tolerable to drive in.—Julia, put on your hat, and tell Perkins to bring me my things.'

The Brading practitioner dared not remonstrate: he murmured something about 'care,' and not staying out too long for the first time; and then took his polite departure. As he was crossing the hall, and afterwards in his carriage, he indulged in a suppressed chuckle, very much like the under-butler's.

'It's to be hoped she won't drive into Brading,' he said to himself; 'if she does, there'll be the devil to pay.'

Lady Talmash did drive into Brading. She took a pleasant country round first, through green lanes where the dog-roses were in their glory, and then came homewards through Brading High-street. It was a pleasant gay-looking street enough, with old gable ends, and latticed windows in the upper stories, and here and there a house decorated with elaborate wood-work carved into heraldic devices—a house that had been occupied by some notable citizen in days gone by.

Half way down, the street opened out into a wide square market-place, with a piazza and clock-tower in the centre; and just here there was a sharp corner, where the pavement was narrow, and the shop-fronts

seemed to butt out upon the road in a rather aggressive manner. When Lady Talmash Brading's pony-carriage came to this point, Julia, whose quick eyes roamed everywhere, gave a little cry of surprise.

'Look, mamma!' she exclaimed; 'there's a new pork-shop, such a nice one.'

'Julia, I wish you would not call out in that way—about new pork-shops, too—it's so absurd.'

There was a heavy wagon in front of them just at this moment, and Lady Talmash was fain to rein in her eager ponies. She had leisure to look listlessly up at the shop.

It was a pork-butcher's, with tender young piglings hanging before the window, and sausages in dainty-looking baskets inside—a most attractive-looking pork-butcher's—and on the board above the window was painted in conspicuous characters the name of REGINALD RAVENSCROFT.

Yes, it was there! It was not a diabolical delusion, like the cat and the skeleton and the gentleman usher in Sir Walter Scott's *Demonology*—it was not an awful dream. The inscription was there—'REGINALD RAVENSCROFT, PORK-BUTCHER.' And hanging in the windows there were placards announcing

‘Dairy-fed Pork,’ ‘Fine Cambridge Sausages fresh daily ;’ and so on.

Lady Talmash flung the reins to her daughter and sprang out of the carriage. She who had never before entered a provision shop of less distinction than Morel’s or Fortnum and Mason’s, walked straight through the narrow doorway of the pork-butcher’s, her silken skirts actually brushing against a little tin tray of mysterious edible lumps, simmering in grease, and labelled ‘Ducks, a penny each.’

My lady saw the ducks, and shuddered. They diffused a savoury odour of sage-and-onion, and on the counter inside there was a large roasted leg of pork, with accompaniments.

It was market-day, and Reginald Ravenscroft, pork-butcher, was not above turning an honest penny by the sale of a cooked joint. The smell of the shop made Lady Talmash feel very faint, but she could not turn any paler than she was when she entered it. She had been white with anger when she stepped out of her pony-carriage.

Reginald Ravenscroft, pork-butcher, was standing behind his counter in a clean white apron, looking the very image of placid contentment.

‘Pray, may I ask the meaning of this degrading

absurdity?' demanded Lady Talmash in a voice that was tremulous with rage.

'Certainly, my dear Leonora. I am quite ready to explain my motives. You urged me to make a position for myself, and I ultimately resolved to do so. I did not feel that I had a genius for the higher walks of commerce, but I did consider myself a good judge of pork. This shop was to let, and people hereabouts told me a pork-butcher's was wanted. And I must say that the business has been remarkably brisk since I opened the place last week. Those ducks, now, in the tin at the door—they're the things Londoners call fagots—you've no idea how they go off at a penny; and there's a profit upon them, though you'd hardly believe it. Have a duck; let me get you a clean plate, and try a duck. They're uncommonly savoury. I make them myself.'

Lady Talmash did not deign to notice this polite offer. Two stalwart country fellows came in at this moment, and bought some roast pork. It was a pleasant sight to see the Zoophyte slicing the leg, not forgetting the stuffing and the gravy, and giving change for half-a-crown with a thoroughly business-like air. When the men were gone, Lady Talmash returned to the charge.

‘Now, Reginald,’ she began sternly, ‘will you be good enough to explain?’

‘My dearest creature, I *have* explained,’ he answered in his blandest manner. ‘What more can I say? It was necessary that I should do something, and this business suits me. You can’t imagine what an endearing animal a pig is, considered as dairy-fed pork. As bacon he’s large and uninteresting—runs into rashers, and becomes monotonous; but there’s a really artistic pleasure in cutting up such pork as that,’ said the Zoophyte, patting a pink-looking loin. ‘And then there’s the sucking-pig—see what a variety he imparts to the business.’

‘Is this meant for a joke, Reginald? If so, it is a most contemptible one.’

‘A joke!—not at all. I was never more serious in my life. You prevented my marriage with the dearest little girl in the world, who would have brought me fifty thousand pounds; and you upbraided me on the subject of my disinclination to get my own living. It was time I should do something. I am sorry your repugnance to the beer trade extends to the pig trade also.’

‘O, I see,’ said my lady indignantly, ‘this is an act of revenge.’

‘I won’t admit that, Leonora; but it is an act of self-assertion. You wouldn’t let me marry Mary Corks, so I have taken to pork as a consolation.’

‘I will allow you five hundred a year,’ said Lady Talmash impetuously—‘settle it upon you—if you’ll abandon this most degrading course.’

‘Thanks; this is a very generous offer, but I really would rather rely upon my own exertions, and pigs. You see, I have only just discovered that I can get my own living.’

Lady Talmash argued and protested, but it was no use. The Zoophyte, after his own tranquil fashion, was as firm as a rock. He was really attached to the pork trade, he repeated, with a calm persistence that was exasperating to the last degree.

Her ladyship drove home in dead silence. Even the much-indulged Julia dared not question her. Her countenance was too awful. For a week she did nothing: but day and night she was pursued by the image of her brother Reginald Ravenscroft selling pork to the commonalty of Brading. The late captain of the Queen’s Own Trumpeters, in shirt-sleeves and a white apron, cutting up pigs!

After enduring this for a week, Lady Talmash

found that she could bear it no longer. She must do something, anything, to put an end to the unspeakable humiliation. She ordered her carriage and drove to Brading High-street, and went once more into the neat little pork-shop, past the tray of 'Ducks, a penny each.'

The Zoophyte was behind his counter, in snow-white shirt-sleeves and spotless apron.

She could only use the same arguments that she had employed before. She was willing to allow him five hundred a year—six—seven—eight hundred even, if he would abandon that degrading employment.

The Zoophyte shrugged his shoulders.

'Bring Mary Corks here, and let her ask me to give up the business,' he said decisively. 'There is no one else who could wean me from pigs.'

'What, humiliate myself to those Corks people, after all I have said?' cried Lady Talmash.

'Either that or endure my connection with pork. I really can't see it's any discredit to you. It's a very clean business.'

Lady Talmash was vanquished. It was a hard thing to bow the knee, as it were, to Mr. Corks the brewer; but anything was preferable to this pork business, this open scandal, which of course had set

all Brading talking about her, and had provoked her very menials to audacious grinning in her superb presence. She told her coachman to drive straight to the Battlements; and half an hour after her interview with the Zoophyte she was seated in the gorgeous new drawing-room, where all the furniture looked as if it had just come out of the upholsterer's shop, talking to Mr. and Mrs. Corks.

She could be very charming when she chose, and the brewer and his wife yielded immediately to her fascination. She was candour itself—told them frankly of her prejudice against trade, and the unworthy means that Captain Ravenscroft had taken to break through it.

‘It is a rum start, certainly,’ said Mr. Corks, ‘and there’s been a deal of talk about it.’

Lady Talmash shivered a little—that she should ever seek a matrimonial alliance with a family whose head talked of ‘a rum start!’—but the image of the pork-butcher's shop was in her mind, and she smiled one of her sweetest smiles.

‘We must get him to abandon this folly, Mr. Corks,’ she said: ‘now I know that your pretty daughter has more influence with him than any one else; she must persuade him to give up pork-butcher-

ing, and when they are married I will settle five or six hundred a year upon him.'

'And you'll receive my girl as a member of your family, hay, my lady? You won't go and turn your back upon her directly she's married?'

'No, Mr. Corks, I am not capable of that. If your daughter marries my brother with my approval, I shall treat her as a sister.'

'Then it's a bargain, my lady,' cried Corks. 'Mary's desperate fond of the Captain, and she shall have him. I said I wouldn't consent to the match unless you was agreeable to it, and I've kept my word. But the girl's been going on anyhow, and has talked about that pork-butcher's shop as if it was the greatest thing that was ever done—like going aboard a lifeboat, or heading a forlorn hope, or summat o' that sort.'

Miss Corks came into the room presently, looking so blooming and so pretty, and behaving with such perfect propriety, that Lady Talmash could not help being pleased with her. She bore the girl off in her carriage at once, and drove back to the pork-shop, where there was a brief and animated little scene performed between the Zoophyte and the two ladies.

The shutters went up that afternoon, and the

name of Reginald Ravenscroft was painted out upon the space above them. Captain Ravenscroft and Miss Corks were married six weeks afterwards. Mary has been presented at Court by her sister-in-law, and Brading Park and the Battlements have exchanged dinners, much to the delight of Mr. and Mrs. Corks. The Captain has furnished a dear little house in Mayfair, where he lives very happily with his pretty young wife and the society he likes, running down to Brading occasionally, to be received with all honour at the Battlements or the Park. The pork-butcher business will be remembered at Brading to the end of time; but it is popularly supposed the Captain did the thing for a wager.

AT CHRUGHTON ABBEY

AT CHRISTON ABBEY

THE Chrightons were very great people in that part of the country where my childhood and youth were spent. To speak of Squire Chrighton was to speak of a power in that remote western region of England. Chrighton Abbey had belonged to the family ever since the reign of Stephen, and there was a curious old wing and a cloistered quadrangle still remaining of the original edifice, and in excellent preservation. The rooms at this end of the house were low, and somewhat darksome and gloomy, it is true; but though rarely used, they were perfectly habitable, and were of service on great occasions when the Abbey was crowded with guests.

The central portion of the Abbey had been rebuilt in the reign of Elizabeth, and was of noble and palatial proportions. The southern wing, and a long music-room with eight tall narrow windows added on to it, were as modern as the time of Anne. Alto-

gether, the Abbey was a splendid mansion, and one of the chief glories of our county.

All the land in Chrughton parish, and for a long way beyond its boundaries, belonged to the great Squire. The parish church was within the park walls, and the living in the Squire's gift—not a very valuable benefice, but a useful thing to bestow upon a younger son's younger son, once in a way, or sometimes on a tutor or dependent of the wealthy house.

I was a Chrughton, and my father, a distant cousin of the reigning Squire, had been Vicar of Chrughton parish. His death left me utterly unprovided for, and I was fain to go out into the bleak unknown world, and earn my living in a position of dependence—a dreadful thing for a Chrughton to be obliged to do.

Out of respect for the traditions and prejudices of my race, I made it my business to seek employment abroad, where the degradation of one solitary Chrughton was not so likely to inflict shame upon the ancient house to which I belonged. Happily for myself, I had been carefully educated, and had industriously cultivated the usual modern accomplishments in the calm retirement of the Vicarage. I was so fortunate as to obtain a situation at Vienna, in a

German family of high rank; and here I remained seven years, laying aside year by year a considerable portion of my liberal salary. When my pupils had grown up, my kind mistress procured me a still more profitable position at St. Petersburg, where I remained five more years, at the end of which time I yielded to a yearning that had been long growing upon me—an ardent desire to see my dear old country home once more.

I had no very near relations in England. My mother had died some years before my father; my only brother was far away, in the Indian Civil Service; sister I had none. But I was a Chrington, and I loved the soil from which I had sprung. I was sure, moreover, of a warm welcome from friends who had loved and honoured my father and mother, and I was still farther encouraged to treat myself to this holiday by the very cordial letters I had from time to time received from the Squire's wife, a noble warm-hearted woman, who fully approved the independent course I had taken, and who had ever shown herself my friend.

In all her letters for some time past Mrs. Chrington begged that whenever I felt myself justified in coming home, I would pay a long visit to the Abbey.

‘I wish you could come at Christmas,’ she wrote, in the autumn of the year of which I am speaking. ‘We shall be very gay, and I expect all manner of pleasant people at the Abbey. Edward is to be married early in the spring—much to his father’s satisfaction, for the match is a good and appropriate one. His *fiancée* is to be among our guests. She is a very beautiful girl; perhaps I should say handsome rather than beautiful. Julia Tremaine, one of the Tremaines of Old Court, near Hayswell—a very old family, as I daresay you remember. She has several brothers and sisters, and will have little, perhaps nothing, from her father; but she has a considerable fortune left her by an aunt, and is thought quite an heiress in the county—not, of course, that this latter fact had any influence with Edward. He fell in love with her at an assize ball in his usual impulsive fashion, and proposed to her in something less than a fortnight. It is, I hope and believe, a thorough love-match on both sides.’

After this followed a cordial repetition of the invitation to myself. I was to go straight to the Abbey when I went to England, and was to take up my abode there as long as ever I pleased.

This letter decided me. The wish to look on the

dear scenes of my happy childhood had grown almost into a pain. I was free to take a holiday, without detriment to my prospects. So, early in December, regardless of the bleak dreary weather, I turned my face homewards, and made the long journey from St. Petersburg to London, under the kind escort of Major Manson, a Queen's Messenger, who was a friend of my late employer, the Baron Fruydorff, and whose courtesy had been enlisted for me by that gentleman.

I was three-and-thirty years of age. Youth was quite gone; beauty I had never possessed; and I was content to think of myself as a confirmed old maid, a quiet spectator of life's great drama, disturbed by no feverish desire for an active part in the play. I had a disposition to which this kind of passive existence is easy. There was no wasting fire in my veins. Simple duties, rare and simple pleasures, filled up my sum of life. The dear ones who had given a special charm and brightness to my existence were gone. Nothing could recall *them*, and without them actual happiness seemed impossible to me. Everything had a subdued and neutral tint; life at its best was calm and colourless, like a gray sunless day in early autumn, serene but joyless.

The old Abbey was in its glory when I arrived there, at about nine o'clock on a clear starlit night. A hoarfrost whitened the broad sweep of grass that stretched away from the long stone terrace in front of the house to a semicircle of grand old oaks and beeches. From the music-room at the end of the southern wing, to the heavily-framed gothic windows of the old rooms on the north, there shone one blaze of light. The scene reminded me of some enchanted palace in a German legend; and I half expected to see the lights fade out all in a moment, and the long stone façade wrapped in sudden darkness.

The old butler, whom I remembered from my very infancy, and who did not seem to have grown a day older during my twelve years' exile, came out of the dining-room as the footman opened the hall-door for me, and gave me cordial welcome, nay, insisted upon helping to bring in my portmanteau with his own hands; an act of unusual condescension, the full force of which was felt by his subordinates.

'It's a real treat to see your pleasant face once more, Miss Sarah,' said this faithful retainer, as he assisted me to take off my travelling-cloak, and took my dressing-bag from my hand. 'You look a trifle older than when you used to live at the Vicarage

twelve year ago, but you're looking uncommon well for all that; and, Lord love your heart, miss, how pleased they all will be to see you! Missus told me with her own lips about your coming. You'd like to take off your bonnet before you go to the drawing-room, I daresay. The house is full of company.—Call Mrs. Marjorum, James, will you?'

The footman disappeared into the back regions, and presently reappeared with Mrs. Marjorum, a portly dame, who, like Truefold the butler, had been a fixture at the Abbey in the time of the present Squire's father. From her I received the same cordial greeting, and by her I was led up staircases and along corridors, till I wondered where I was being taken.

We arrived at last at a very comfortable room—a square tapestried chamber, with a low ceiling supported by a great oaken beam. The room looked cheery enough, with a bright fire roaring in the wide chimney; but it had a somewhat ancient aspect, which the superstitiously inclined might have associated with possible ghosts.

I was fortunately of a matter-of-fact disposition, utterly sceptical upon the ghost subject; and the old-fashioned appearance of the room took my fancy.

‘We are in King Stephen’s wing, are we not, Mrs. Marjorum?’ I asked; ‘this room seems quite strange to me. I doubt if I have ever been in it before.’

‘Very likely not, miss. Yes, this is the old wing. Your window looks out into the old stable-yard, where the kennel used to be in the time of our Squire’s grandfather, when the Abbey was even a finer place than it is now, I’ve heard say. We are so full of company this winter, you see, miss, that we are obliged to make use of all these rooms. You’ll have no need to feel lonesome. There’s Captain and Mrs. Cranwick in the next room to this, and the two Miss Newports in the blue room opposite.’

‘My dear good Marjorum, I like my quarters excessively; and I quite enjoy the idea of sleeping in a room that was extant in the time of Stephen, when the Abbey really was an abbey. I daresay some grave old monk has worn these boards with his devout knees.’

The old woman stared dubiously, with the air of a person who had small sympathy with monkish times, and begged to be excused for leaving me, she had so much on her hands just now. There was coffee to be sent in; and she doubted if the

still-room maid would manage matters properly, if she, Mrs. Marjorum, were not at hand to see that things were right.

‘ You’ve only to ring your bell, miss, and Susan will attend to you. She’s used to help waiting on our young ladies sometimes, and she’s very handy. Missus has given particular orders that she should be always at your service.’

‘ Mrs. Chrington is very kind ; but I assure you, Marjorum, I don’t require the help of a maid once in a month. I am accustomed to do everything for myself. There, run along, Mrs. Marjorum, and see after your coffee ; and I’ll be down in the drawing-room in ten minutes. Are there many people there, by-the-bye ?’

‘ A good many. There’s Miss Tremaine, and her mamma and younger sister ; of course you’ve heard all about the marriage — such a handsome young lady — rather too proud for my liking ; but the Tremaines always were a proud family, and this one’s an heiress. Mr. Edward is so fond of her — thinks the ground is scarcely good enough for her to walk upon, I do believe ; and somehow I can’t help wishing he’d chosen some one else — some one who would have thought more of him, and who

would not take all his attentions in such a cool off-hand way. But of course it isn't my business to say such things, and I wouldn't venture upon it to any one but you, Miss Sarah.'

She told me that I would find dinner ready for me in the breakfast-room, and then bustled off, leaving me to my toilet.

This ceremony I performed as rapidly as I could, admiring the perfect comfort of my chamber as I dressed. Every modern appliance had been added to the sombre and ponderous furniture of an age gone by, and the combination produced a very pleasant effect. Perfume-bottles of ruby-coloured Bohemian glass, china brush-trays and ring-stands, brightened the massive oak dressing-table; a low luxurious chintz-covered easy-chair of the Victorian era stood before the hearth; a dear little writing-table of polished maple was placed conveniently near it; and in the background the tapestried walls loomed duskily, as they had done hundreds of years before my time.

I had no leisure for dreamy musings on the past, however, provocative though the chamber might be of such thoughts. I arranged my hair in its usual simple fashion, and put on a dark-gray silk dress,

trimmed with some fine old black lace that had been given to me by the Baroness—an unobtrusive demi-toilette, adapted to any occasion. I tied a massive gold cross, an ornament that had belonged to my dear mother, round my neck with a scarlet ribbon; and my costume was complete. One glance at the looking-glass convinced me that there was nothing dowdy in my appearance; and then I hurried along the corridor and down the staircase to the hall, where Truefold received me and conducted me to the breakfast-room, in which an excellent dinner awaited me.

I did not waste much time over this repast, although I had eaten nothing all day; for I was anxious to make my way to the drawing-room. Just as I had finished, the door opened, and Mrs. Chrigh-ton sailed in, looking superb in a dark-green velvet dress, richly trimmed with old point-lace. She had been a beauty in her youth, and, as a matron, was still remarkably handsome. She had, above all, a charm of expression which to me was rarer and more delightful than her beauty of feature and complexion.

She put her arms round me, and kissed me affectionately.

‘I have only this moment been told of your

arrival, my dear Sarah,' she said; 'and I find you have been in the house half an hour. What must you have thought of me!'

'What can I think of you, except that you are all goodness, my dear Fanny? I did not expect you to leave your guests to receive me, and am really sorry that you have done so. I need no ceremony to convince me of your kindness.'

'But, my dear child, it is not a question of ceremony. I have been looking forward so anxiously to your coming, and I should not have liked to see you for the first time before all those people. Give me another kiss, that's a darling. Welcome to Chrughton. Remember, Sarah, this house is always to be your home, whenever you have need of one.'

'My dear kind cousin! And you are not ashamed of me, who have eaten the bread of strangers?'

'Ashamed of you! No, my love; I admire your industry and spirit. And now come to the drawing-room. The girls will be so pleased to see you.'

'And I to see them. They were quite little things when I went away, romping in the hay-fields in their short white frocks; and now, I suppose, they are handsome young women.'

'They are very nice-looking; not so handsome

as their brother. Edward is really a magnificent young man. I do not think my maternal pride is guilty of any gross exaggeration when I say that.'

'And Miss Tremaine?' I said. 'I am very curious to see her.'

I fancied a faint shadow came over my cousin's face as I mentioned this name.

'Miss Tremaine—yes—you cannot fail to admire her,' she said, rather thoughtfully.

She drew my hand through her arm and led me to the drawing-room; a very large room, with a fireplace at each end, brilliantly lighted to-night, and containing about twenty people, scattered about in little groups, and all seeming to be talking and laughing merrily. Mrs. Chrington took me straight to one of the fireplaces, beside which two girls were sitting on a low sofa, while a young man of something more than six feet high stood near them, with his arm resting on the broad marble slab of the mantelpiece. A glance told me that this young man with the dark eyes and crisp waving brown hair was Edward Chrington. His likeness to his mother was in itself enough to tell me who he was; but I remembered the boyish face and bright eyes which had so often looked up to mine in the days when the heir

of the Abbey was one of the most juvenile scholars at Eton.

The lady seated nearest Edward Chrington attracted my chief attention; for I felt sure that this lady was Miss Tremaine. She was tall and slim, and carried her head and neck with a stately air, which struck me more than anything in that first glance. Yes, she was handsome, undeniably handsome; and my cousin had been right when she said I could not fail to admire her; but to me the dazzlingly fair face, with its perfect features, the marked aquiline nose, the short upper lip, expressive of unmitigated pride, the full cold blue eyes, pencilled brows, and aureole of pale golden hair, were the very reverse of sympathetic. That Miss Tremaine must needs be universally admired, it was impossible to doubt; but I could not understand how any man could fall in love with such a woman.

She was dressed in white muslin, and her only ornament was a superb diamond locket, heart-shaped, tied round her long white throat with a broad black ribbon. Her hair, of which she seemed to have a great quantity, was arranged in a massive coronet of plaits, which surmounted the small head as proudly as an imperial crown.

To this young lady Mrs. Chrington introduced me.

‘I have another cousin to present to you, Julia,’ she said, smiling—‘Miss Sarah Chrington, just arrived from St. Petersburg.’

‘From St. Petersburg? What an awful journey! How do you do, Miss Chrington? It was really very courageous of you to come so far. Did you travel alone?’

‘No; I had a companion as far as London, and a very kind one. I came on to the Abbey by myself.’

The young lady had given me her hand with rather a languid air, I thought. I saw the cold blue eyes surveying me curiously from head to foot, and it seemed to me as if I could read the condemnatory summing-up—‘A frump, and a poor relation’—in Miss Tremaine’s face.

I had not much time to think about her just now; for Edward Chrington suddenly seized both my hands, and gave me so hearty and loving a welcome, that he almost brought the tears ‘up from my heart into my eyes.’

Two pretty girls in blue dresses came running forward from different parts of the room, and gaily

saluted me as 'Cousin Sarah;' and the three surrounded me in a little cluster, and assailed me with a string of questions—whether I remembered this, and whether I had forgotten that, the battle in the hay-field, the charity-school tea-party in the vicarage orchard, our picnics in Hawsley Combe, our botanical and entomological excursions on Chorwell-common, and all the simple pleasures of their childhood and my youth. While this catechism was going on, Miss Tremaine watched us with a disdainful expression, which she evidently did not care to hide.

'I should not have thought you capable of such Arcadian simplicity, Mr. Chrington,' she said at last. 'Pray continue your recollections. These juvenile experiences are most interesting.'

'I don't expect you to be interested in them, Julia,' Edward answered, with a tone that sounded rather too bitter for a lover. 'I know what a contempt you have for trifling rustic pleasures. Were you ever a child yourself, I wonder, by the way? I don't believe you ever ran after a butterfly in your life.'

Her speech put an end to our talk of the past, somehow. I saw that Edward was vexed, and that all the pleasant memories of his boyhood had fled

before that cold scornful face. A young lady in pink, who had been sitting next Julia Tremaine, vacated the sofa, and Edward slipped into her place, and devoted himself for the rest of the evening to his betrothed. I glanced at his bright expressive face now and then as he talked to her, and could not help wondering what charm he could discover in one who seemed to me so unworthy of him.

It was midnight when I went back to my room in the north wing, thoroughly happy in the cordial welcome that had been given me. I rose early next morning—for early rising had long been habitual to me—and, drawing back the damask-curtain that sheltered my window, looked out at the scene below.

I saw a stable-yard, a spacious quadrangle, surrounded by the closed doors of stables and dog-kennels: low massive buildings of gray stone, with the ivy creeping over them here and there, and with an ancient moss-grown look, that gave them a curious interest in my eyes. This range of stabling must have been disused for a long time, I fancied. The stables now in use were a pile of handsome red-brick buildings at the other extremity of the house, in the rear of the music-room, and forming a striking feature in the back view of the Abbey.

I had often heard how the present Squire's grandfather had kept a pack of hounds, which had been sold immediately after his death; and I knew that my cousin, the present Mr. Chrington, had been more than once requested to follow his ancestor's good example; for there were no hounds now within twenty miles of the Abbey, though it was a fine country for fox-hunting.

George Chrington, however—the reigning lord of the Abbey—was not a hunting man. He had, indeed, a secret horror of the sport; for more than one scion of the house had perished untimely in the hunting-field. The family had not been altogether a lucky one, in spite of its wealth and prosperity. It was not often that the goodly heritage had descended to the eldest son. Death in some form or other—on too many occasions a violent death—had come between the heir and his inheritance. And when I pondered on the dark pages in the history of the house, I used to wonder whether my cousin Fanny was ever troubled by morbid forebodings about her only and fondly-loved son.

Was there a ghost at Chrington—that spectral visitant without which the state and splendour of a grand old house seem scarcely complete? Yes, I

had heard vague hints of some shadowy presence that had been seen on rare occasions within the precincts of the Abbey; but I had never been able to ascertain what shape it bore.

Those whom I questioned were prompt to assure me that they had seen nothing. They had heard stories of the past—foolish legends, most likely, not worth listening to. Once, when I had spoken of the subject to my cousin George, he told me angrily never again to let him hear any allusion to *that* folly from my lips.

That December passed merrily. The old house was full of really pleasant people, and the brief winter days were spent in one unbroken round of amusement and gaiety. To me the old familiar English country-house life was a perpetual delight—to feel myself amongst kindred an unceasing pleasure. I could not have believed myself capable of being so completely happy.

I saw a great deal of my cousin Edward, and I think he contrived to make Miss Tremaine understand that, to please him, she must be gracious to me. She certainly took some pains to make herself agreeable to me; and I discovered that, in spite of that proud disdainful temper, which she so rarely

took the trouble to conceal, she was really anxious to gratify her lover.

Their courtship was not altogether a halcyon period. They had frequent quarrels, the details of which Edward's sisters, Sophy and Agnes, delighted to discuss with me. It was the struggle of two proud spirits for mastery; but my cousin Edward's pride was of the nobler kind—the lofty scorn of all things mean—a pride that does not ill-become a generous nature. To me he seemed all that was admirable, and I was never tired of hearing his mother praise him. I think my cousin Fanny knew this, and that she used to confide in me as fully as if I had been her sister.

‘I daresay you can see I am not quite so fond as I should wish to be of Julia Tremaine,’ she said to me one day; ‘but I am very glad that my son is going to marry. My husband's has not been a fortunate family, you know, Sarah. The eldest sons have been wild and unlucky for generations past; and when Edward was a boy I used to have many a bitter hour, dreading what the future might bring forth. Thank God he has been, and is, all that I can wish. He has never given me an hour's anxiety by any act of his. Yet I am not the less glad of his

marriage. The heirs of Chrington who have come to an untimely end have all died unmarried. There was Hugh Chrington, in the reign of George the Second, who was killed in a duel; John, who broke his back in the hunting-field thirty years later; Theodore, shot accidentally by a schoolfellow at Eton; Jasper, whose yacht went down in the Mediterranean forty years ago. An awful list, is it not, Sarah? I shall feel as if my son were safer somehow when he is married. It will seem as if he has escaped the ban that has fallen on so many of our house. He will have greater reason to be careful of his life when he is a married man.'

I agreed with Mrs. Chrington; but could not help wishing that Edward had chosen any other woman than the cold handsome Julia. I could not fancy his future life happy with such a mate.

Christmas came by and by—a real old English Christmas—frost and snow without, warmth and revelry within; skating on the great pond in the park, and sledging on the ice-bound high-roads, by day; private theatricals, charades, and amateur concerts by night. I was surprised to find that Miss Tremaine refused to take any active part in these evening amusements. She preferred to sit among the elders

as a spectator, and had the air and bearing of a princess for whose diversion all our entertainments had been planned. She seemed to think that she fulfilled her mission by sitting still and looking handsome. No desire to show-off appeared to enter her mind. Her intense pride left no room for vanity. Yet I knew that she could have distinguished herself as a musician if she had chosen to do so ; for I had heard her sing and play in Mrs. Chrington's morning-room, when only Edward, his sisters, and myself were present ; and I knew that both as a vocalist and a pianist she excelled all our guests.

The two girls and I had many a happy morning and afternoon, going from cottage to cottage in a pony-carriage laden with Mrs. Chrington's gifts to the poor of her parish. There was no public formal distribution of blanketing and coals, but the wants of all were amply provided for in a quiet friendly way. Agnes and Sophy, aided by an indefatigable maid, the Rector's daughter, and one or two other young ladies, had been at work for the last three months making smart warm frocks and useful under-garments for the children of the cottagers ; so that on Christmas morning every child in the parish was arrayed in a complete set of new garments. Mrs. Chrington

had an admirable faculty of knowing precisely what was most wanted in every household; and our pony-carriage used to convey a varied collection of goods, every parcel directed in the firm free hand of the châtelaine of the Abbey.

Edward used sometimes to drive us on these expeditions, and I found that he was eminently popular among the poor of Chrughton parish. He had such an airy pleasant way of talking to them, a manner which set them at their ease at once. He never forgot their names or relationships, or wants or ailments; had a packet of exactly the kind of tobacco each man liked best always ready in his coat-pockets; and was full of jokes, which may not have been particularly witty, but which used to make the small low-roofed chambers ring with hearty laughter.

Miss Tremaine coolly declined any share in these pleasant duties.

‘I don’t like poor people,’ she said. ‘I daresay it sounds very dreadful, but it’s just as well to confess my iniquity at once. I never can get on with them, or they with me. I am not *simpatica*, I suppose. And then I cannot endure their stifling rooms. The close faint odour of their houses gives me a fever. And again, what is the use of visiting them? It is

only an inducement to them to become hypocrites. Surely it is better to arrange on a sheet of paper what it is just and fair for them to have—blankets, and coals, and groceries, and money, and wine, and so on—and let them receive the things from some trustworthy servant. In that case, there need be no cringing on one side, and no endurance on the other.'

'But, you see, Julia, there are some kinds of people to whom that sort of thing is not a question of endurance,' Edward answered, his face flushing indignantly. 'People who like to share in the pleasure they give—who like to see the poor careworn faces lighted up with sudden joy—who like to make these sons of the soil feel that there is some friendly link between themselves and their masters—some point of union between the cottage and the great house. There is my mother, for instance: all these duties which you think so tiresome are to her an unfailing delight. There will be a change, I'm afraid, Julia, when you are mistress of the Abbey.'

'You have not made me that yet,' she answered; 'and there is plenty of time for you to change your mind, if you do not think me suited for the position. I do not pretend to be like your mother. It is better

that I should not affect any feminine virtues which I do not possess.

After this Edward insisted on driving our pony-carriage almost every day, leaving Miss Tremaine to find her own amusement ; and I think this conversation was the beginning of an estrangement between them, which became more serious than any of their previous quarrels had been.

Miss Tremaine did not care for sledging, or skating, or billiard-playing. She had none of the ' fast' tendencies which have become so common lately. She used to sit in one particular bow-window of the drawing-room all the morning, working a screen in berlin-wool and beads, assisted and attended by her younger sister Laura, who was a kind of slave to her—a very colourless young lady in mind, capable of no such thing as an original opinion, and in person a pale replica of her sister.

Had there been less company in the house, the breach between Edward Chrughton and his betrothed must have become notorious ; but with a house so full of people, all bent on enjoying themselves, I doubt if it was noticed. On all public occasions my cousin showed himself attentive and apparently devoted to Miss Tremaine. It was only I and his sis-

ters who knew the real state of affairs. I was surprised, after the young lady's total repudiation of all benevolent sentiments, when she beckoned me aside one morning, and slipped a little purse of gold—twenty sovereigns—into my hand.

‘I shall be very much obliged if you will distribute that among your cottagers to-day, Miss Chrington,’ she said. ‘Of course I should like to give them something: it's only the trouble of talking to them that I shrink from; and you are just the person for an almoner. Don't mention my little commission to any one, please.’

‘Of course I may tell Edward,’ I said; for I was anxious that he should know his betrothed was not as hard-hearted as she had appeared.

‘To him least of all,’ she answered eagerly. ‘You know that our ideas vary on that point. He would think I gave the money to please him. Not a word, pray, Miss Chrington.’ I submitted, and distributed my sovereigns quietly, with the most careful exercise of my judgment.

So Christmas came and passed. It was the day after the great anniversary—a very quiet day for the guests and family at the Abbey, but a grand occasion for the servants, who were to have their annual ball

in the evening—a ball to which all the humbler class of tenantry were invited. The frost had broken up suddenly, and it was a thorough wet day—a depressing kind of day for any one whose spirits are liable to be affected by the weather, as mine are. I felt out of spirits for the first time since my arrival at the Abbey.

No one else appeared to feel the same influence. The elder ladies sat in a wide semicircle round one of the fireplaces in the drawing-room; a group of merry girls and young men chatted gaily before the other. From the billiard-room there came the frequent clash of balls, and cheery peals of stentorian laughter. I sat in one of the deep windows, half hidden by the curtains, reading a novel—one of a boxful that came from town every month.

If the picture within was bright and cheerful, the prospect was dreary enough without. The fairy forest of snow-wreathed trees, the white valleys and undulating banks of snow, had vanished, and the rain dripped slowly and sullenly upon a darksome expanse of soddened grass, and a dismal background of leafless timber. The merry sound of the sledge-bells no longer enlivened the air; all was silence and gloom.

Edward Chrughton was not amongst the billiard-players; he was pacing the drawing-room to and fro from end to end, with an air that was at once moody and restless.

‘Thank heaven, the frost has broken up at last!’ he exclaimed, stopping in front of the window where I sat.

He had spoken his thoughts aloud, quite unaware of my close neighbourhood. Unpromising as his aspect was just then, I ventured to accost him.

‘What bad taste, to prefer such weather as this to frost and snow!’ I answered. ‘The park looked enchanting yesterday—a real scene from fairyland. And only look at it to-day!’

‘O yes, of course, from an artistic point of view, the snow was better. The place does look something like the great dismal swamp to-day; but I am thinking of hunting, and that confounded frost made a day’s sport impossible. We are in for a spell of mild weather now, I think.’

‘But you are not going to hunt, are you, Edward?’

‘Indeed I am, my gentle cousin, in spite of that frightened look in your amiable countenance.’

‘I thought there were no hounds hereabouts.’

‘Nor are there; but there is as fine a pack as any in the country—the Daleborough hounds—five-and-twenty miles away.’

‘And you are going five-and-twenty miles for the sake of a day’s run?’

‘I would travel forty, fifty, a hundred miles, for that same diversion. But I am not going for a single day this time; I am going over to Sir Francis Wycherly’s place—young Frank Wycherly and I were chums at Christchurch—for three or four days. I am due to-day, but I scarcely cared to travel by cross-country roads in such rain as this. However, if the floodgates of the sky are loosened for a new deluge, I must go to-morrow.’

‘What a headstrong young man!’ I exclaimed. ‘And what will Miss Tremaine say to this desertion?’ I asked in a lower voice.

‘Miss Tremaine can say whatever she pleases. She had it in her power to make me forget the pleasures of the chase, if she had chosen, though we had been in the heart of the shires, and the welkin ringing with the baying of hounds.’

‘O, I begin to understand. This hunting engagement is not of long standing.’

‘No; I began to find myself bored here a few

days ago, and wrote to Frank to offer myself for two or three days at Wycherly. I received a most cordial answer by return, and am booked till the end of this week.'

'You have not forgotten the ball on the first?'

'O, no; to do that would be to vex my mother, and to offer a slight to our guests. I shall be here on New-Year's night, come what may.'

Come what may! so lightly spoken. The time came when I had bitter cause to remember those words.

'I'm afraid you will vex your mother by going at all,' I said. 'You know what a horror both she and your father have of hunting.'

'A most un-country-gentleman-like aversion on my father's part. But he is a dear old book-worm, seldom happy out of his library. Yes, I admit they both have a dislike to hunting in the abstract; but they know I am a pretty good rider, and that it would need a bigger country than I shall find about Wycherly to floor me. You need not feel nervous, my dear Sarah; I am not going to give papa and mamma the smallest ground for uneasiness.'

'You will take your own horses, I suppose?'

'That goes without saying. No man who has

cattle of his own cares to mount another man's horses. I shall take Pepperbox and the Druid.'

'Pepperbox has a queer temper, I have heard your sisters say.'

'My sisters expect a horse to be a kind of overgrown baa-lamb. Everything splendid in horseflesh and womankind is prone to that slight defect, an ugly temper. There is Miss Tremaine, for instance.'

'I shall take Miss Tremaine's part. I believe it is you who are in the wrong in the matter of this estrangement, Edward.'

'Do you? Well, wrong or right, my cousin, until the fair Julia comes to me with sweet looks and gentle words, we can never be what we have been.'

'You will return from your hunting expedition in a softer mood,' I answered; 'that is to say, if you persist in going. But I hope and believe you will change your mind.'

'Such a change is not within the limits of possibility, Sarah. I am fixed as Fate.'

He strolled away, humming some gay hunting-song as he went. I was alone with Mrs. Chrington later in the afternoon, and she spoke to me about this intended visit to Wycherly.

‘Edward has set his heart upon it, evidently,’ she said regretfully, ‘and his father and I have always made a point of avoiding anything that could seem like domestic tyranny. Our dear boy is such a good son, that it would be very hard if we came between him and his pleasures. You know what a morbid horror my husband has of the dangers of the hunting-field, and perhaps I am almost as weak-minded. But in spite of this, we have never interfered with Edward’s enjoyment of a sport which he is passionately fond of; and hitherto, thank God! he has escaped without a scratch. Yet I have had many a bitter hour, I can assure you, my dear, when my son has been away in Leicestershire hunting four days a week.’

‘He rides well, I suppose?’

‘Superbly. He has a great reputation among the sportsmen of our neighbourhood. I daresay when he is master of the Abbey he will start a pack of hounds, and revive the old days of his great-grandfather, Meredith Chrington.’

‘I fancy the hounds were kenneled in the stable-yard below my bedroom window in those days, were they not, Fanny?’

‘Yes,’ Mrs. Chrington answered gravely; and I

wondered at the sudden shadow that fell upon her face.

I went up to my room earlier than usual that afternoon, and I had a clear hour to spare before it would be time to dress for the seven-o'clock dinner. This leisure hour I intended to devote to letter-writing; but on arriving in my room I found myself in a very idle frame of mind, and instead of opening my desk, I seated myself in the low easy-chair before the fire, and fell into a reverie.

How long I had been sitting there I scarcely know; I had been half meditating, half dozing, mixing broken snatches of thought with brief glimpses of dreaming, when I was startled into wakefulness by a sound that was strange to me.

It was a huntsman's horn—a few low plaintive notes on a huntsman's horn—notes which had a strange far-away sound, more unearthly than anything my ears had ever heard. I thought of the music in *Der Freischutz*; but the wildest snatch of melody Weber ever wrote had not so ghastly a sound as these few simple notes conveyed to my ear.

I stood transfixed, listening to that awful music. It had grown dusk, my fire was almost out, and the room in shadow. As I listened, a light flashed sud-

denly on the wall before me. The light was as unearthly as the sound—phantasmal as the ignus fatuus that plays amidst the rigging of a ship upon a storm-swept sea.

I ran to the window; for this spectral light flashed through the window upon the opposite wall. The great gates of the stable-yard were open, and men in scarlet coats were riding in, a pack of hounds crowding in before them, obedient to the huntsman's whip. The whole scene was dimly visible by the declining light of the winter evening and the uncertain glimmer of a lantern carried by one of the men. It was this lantern which had shone upon the tapestried wall. I saw the stable-doors opened one after another; gentlemen and grooms alighting from their horses; the dogs driven into their kennel; the helpers hurrying to and fro; and that strange wan lantern-light flashing here and there in the gathering dusk. But there was no sound of horse's hoof or of human voices—not one yelp or cry from the hounds. Since those faint far-away sounds of the horn had died out in the distance, the ghastly silence had been unbroken.

I stood at my window quite calmly, and watched while the group of men and animals in the yard be-

low noiselessly dispersed. There was nothing supernatural in the manner of their disappearance. The figures did not vanish or melt into empty air. One by one I saw the horses led into their separate quarters; one by one the redcoats strolled out of the gates, and the grooms departed, some one way, some another. The scene, but for its noiselessness, was natural enough; and had I been a stranger in the house, I might have fancied that those figures were real—those stables in full occupation.

But I knew that stable-yard and all its range of building to have been disused for more than half a century. Could I believe that, without an hour's warning, the long-deserted quadrangle would be filled—the empty stalls tenanted?

Had some hunting-party from the neighbourhood sought shelter here, glad to escape the pitiless rain? That was not impossible, I thought. I was an utter unbeliever in all ghostly things—ready to credit any possibility rather than suppose that I had been looking upon shadows. And yet the noiselessness, the awful sound of that horn—the unearthly gleam of that lantern! Little superstitious as I might be, a cold sweat stood out upon my forehead, and I trembled in every limb.

For some minutes I stood by the window, staring blankly into the empty quadrangle. Then I roused myself suddenly, and ran softly down-stairs by a back staircase leading to the servants' quarters, determined to solve the mystery somehow or other. The way to Mrs. Marjorum's room was familiar to me from old experience, and it was thither that I bent my steps, determined to ask the housekeeper the meaning of what I had seen. I had a lurking conviction that it would be well for me not to mention that scene to any member of the family till I had taken counsel with some one who knew the secrets of Chrughton Abbey.

I heard the sound of merry voices and laughter as I passed the kitchen and servants' hall. Men and maids were all busy in the pleasant labour of decorating their rooms for the evening's festival. They were putting the last touches to garlands of holly and laurel, ivy and fir, as I passed the open doors; and in both rooms I saw tables laid for a substantial tea. The housekeeper's room was in a retired nook at the end of a long passage—a charming old room, panelled with dark oak, and full of capacious cupboards, which in my childhood I had looked upon as storehouses of inexhaustible treasure in the way of

preserves and other confectionery. It was a shady old room, with a wide old-fashioned fireplace, cool in summer, when the hearth was adorned with a great jar of roses and lavender; and warm in winter, when the logs burnt merrily all day long.

I opened the door softly, and went in. Mrs. Marjorum was dozing in a high-backed arm-chair by the glowing hearth, dressed in her state gown of gray watered silk, and with a cap that was a perfect rose-garden. She opened her eyes as I approached her, and stared at me with a puzzled look for the first moment or so.

‘Why, is that you, Miss Sarah?’ she exclaimed; ‘and looking as pale as a ghost, I can see, even by this fire-light! Let me just light a candle, and then I’ll get you some sal volatile. Sit down in my arm-chair, miss. Why, I declare you’re all of a tremble!’

She put me into her easy-chair before I could resist, and lighted the two candles which stood ready upon her table, while I was trying to speak. My lips were dry, and it seemed at first as if the power of speech had left me.

‘Never mind the sal volatile, Marjorum,’ I said at last. ‘I am not ill. I’ve been startled, that’s all;

and I've come to ask you for an explanation of the business that frightened me.'

'What business, Miss Sarah?'

'You must have heard something of it yourself, surely. Didn't you hear a horn just now, a huntsman's horn?'

'A horn! Lord no, Miss Sarah. What ever could have put such a fancy into your head?'

I saw that Mrs. Marjorum's ruddy cheeks had suddenly lost their colour, that she was now almost as pale as I could have been myself.

'It was no fancy,' I said; 'I heard the sound, and saw the people. A hunting-party has just taken shelter in the north quadrangle. Dogs and horses, and gentlemen and servants.'

'What were they like, Miss Sarah?' the house-keeper asked in a strange voice.

'I can hardly tell you that. I could see that they wore red coats; and I could scarcely see more than that. Yes, I did get a glimpse of one of the gentlemen by the light of the lantern. A tall man, with gray hair and whiskers, and a stoop in his shoulders. I noticed that he wore a short-waisted coat with a very high collar—a coat that looked a hundred years old.'

'The old Squire!' muttered Mrs. Marjorum under

her breath; and then turning to me, she said with a cheery resolute air, 'You've been dreaming, Miss Sarah, that's just what it is. You've dropped off in your chair before the fire, and had a dream, that's it.'

'No, Marjorum, it was no dream. The horn woke me, and I stood at my window and saw the dogs and huntsmen come in.'

'Do you know, Miss Sarah, that the gates of the north quadrangle have been locked and barred for the last forty years, and that no one ever goes in there except through the house?'

'The gates may have been opened this evening to give shelter to strangers,' I said.

'Not when the only keys that will open them hang yonder in my cupboard, miss,' said the housekeeper, pointing to a corner of the room.

'But I tell you, Marjorum, these people came into the quadrangle; the horses and dogs are in the stables and kennels at this moment. I'll go and ask Mr. Chrington, or my cousin Fanny, or Edward, all about it, since you won't tell me the truth.'

I said this with a purpose, and it answered. Mrs. Marjorum caught me eagerly by the wrist.

'No, miss, don't do that; for pity's sake don't do that; don't breathe a word to missus or master.'

‘But why not?’

‘Because you’ve seen that which always brings misfortune and sorrow to this house, Miss Sarah. You’ve seen the dead.’

‘What do you mean?’ I gasped, awed in spite of myself.

‘I daresay you’ve heard say that there’s been *something* seen at times at the Abbey—many years apart, thank God; for it never came that trouble didn’t come after it.’

‘Yes,’ I answered hurriedly; ‘but I could never get any one to tell me what it was that haunted this place.’

‘No, miss. Those that know have kept the secret. But you have seen it all to-night. There’s no use in trying to hide it from you any longer. You have seen the old Squire, Meredith Chrughton, whose eldest son was killed by a fall in the hunting-field, brought home dead one December night, an hour after his father and the rest of the party had come safe home to the Abbey. The old gentleman had missed his son in the field, but had thought nothing of that, fancying that Master John had had enough of the day’s sport, and had turned his horse’s head homewards. He was found by a labouring-man, poor

lad, lying in a ditch with his back broken, and his horse beside him staked. The old Squire never held his head up after that day, and never rode to hounds again, though he was passionately fond of hunting. Dogs and horses were sold, and the north quadrangle has been empty from that day.'

'How long is it since this kind of thing has been seen?'

'A long time, miss. I was a slip of a girl when it last happened. It was in the winter-time—this very night—the night Squire Meredith's son was killed; and the house was full of company, just as it is now. There was a wild young Oxford gentleman sleeping in your room at that time, and he saw the hunting-party come into the quadrangle; and what did he do but throw his window wide open, and give them the view-hallo as loud as ever he could. He had only arrived the day before, and knew nothing about the neighbourhood; so at dinner he began to ask where were his friends the sportsmen, and to hope he should be allowed to have a run with the Abbey hounds next day. It was in the time of our master's father; and his lady at the head of the table turned as white as a sheet when she heard this talk. She had good reason, poor soul! Before the

week was out her husband was lying dead. He was struck with a fit of apoplexy, and never spoke or knew any one afterwards.'

'An awful coincidence,' I said; 'but it may have been only a coincidence.'

'I've heard other stories, miss—heard them from those that wouldn't deceive—all proving the same thing: that the appearance of the old Squire and his pack is a warning of death to this house.'

'I cannot believe these things,' I exclaimed; 'I cannot believe them. Does Mr. Edward know anything about this?'

'No, miss. His father and mother have been most careful that it should be kept from him.'

'I think he is too strong-minded to be much affected by the fact,' I said.

'And you'll not say anything about what you've seen to my master or my mistress, will you, Miss Sarah?' pleaded the faithful old servant. 'The knowledge of it would be sure to make them nervous and unhappy. And if evil is to come upon this house, it isn't in human power to prevent its coming.'

'God forbid that there is any evil at hand!' I answered. 'I am no believer in visions or omens. After all, I would sooner fancy that I was dreaming

—dreaming with my eyes open as I stood at the window—than that I beheld the shadows of the dead.'

Mrs. Marjorum sighed, and said nothing. I could see that she believed firmly in the phantom hunt.

I went back to my room to dress for dinner. However rationally I might try to think of what I had seen, its effect upon my mind and nerves was not the less powerful. I could think of nothing else; and a morbid dread of coming misery weighed me down like an actual burden.

There was a very cheerful party in the drawing-room when I went down-stairs, and at dinner the talk and laughter were unceasing; but I could see that my cousin Fanny's face was a little graver than usual, and I had no doubt she was thinking of her son's intended visit to Wycherly.

At the thought of this a sudden terror flashed upon me. How if the shadows I had seen that evening were ominous of danger to him—to Edward, the heir and only son of the house? My heart grew cold as I thought of this, and yet in the next moment I despised myself for such weakness.

'It is natural enough for an old servant to believe in such things,' I said to myself; 'but for me —

an educated woman of the world — preposterous folly.’

And yet from that moment I began to puzzle myself in the endeavour to devise some means by which Edward’s journey might be prevented. Of my own influence I knew that I was powerless to hinder his departure by so much as an hour; but I fancied that Julia Tremaine could persuade him to any sacrifice of his inclination, if she could only humble her pride so far as to entreat it. I determined to appeal to her in the course of the evening.

We were very merry all that evening. The servants and their guests danced in the great hall, while we sat in the gallery above, and in little groups upon the staircase, watching their diversions. I think this arrangement afforded excellent opportunities for flirtation, and that the younger members of our party made good use of their chances—with one exception: Edward Chrughton and his affianced contrived to keep far away from each other all the evening.

While all was going on noisily in the hall below, I managed to get Miss Tremaine apart from the others in the embrasure of a painted window on the stairs, where there was a wide oaken seat. Seated here side by side, I described to her, under a promise

of secrecy, the scene which I had witnessed that afternoon, and my conversation with Mrs. Marjorum.

‘But, good gracious me, Miss Chrington!’ the young lady exclaimed, lifting her pencilled eyebrows with unconcealed disdain, ‘you don’t mean to tell me that you believe in such nonsense—ghosts and omens, and old woman’s folly like that!’

‘I assure you, Miss Tremaine, it is most difficult for me to believe in the supernatural,’ I answered earnestly; ‘but that which I saw this evening was something more than human. The thought of it has made me very unhappy; and I cannot help connecting it somehow with my cousin Edward’s visit to Wycherly. If I had the power to prevent his going, I would do it at any cost; but I have not. You alone have influence enough for that. For heaven’s sake use it! do anything to hinder his hunting with the Daleborough hounds.’

‘You would have me humiliate myself by asking him to forego his pleasure, and that after his conduct to me during the last week?’

‘I confess that he has done much to offend you. But you love him, Miss Tremaine. Though you are too proud to let your love be seen, I am certain that

you do love him. For pity's sake speak to him; do not let him hazard his life, when a few words from you may prevent the danger.'

'I don't believe he would give up this visit to please me,' she answered; 'and I shall certainly not put it in his power to humiliate me by a refusal. Besides, all this fear of yours is such utter nonsense. As if nobody had ever hunted before! My brothers hunt four times a week every winter, and not one of them has ever been the worse for it yet.'

I did not give up the attempt lightly. I pleaded with this proud obstinate girl for a long time, as long as I could induce her to listen to me; but it was all in vain. She stuck to her text—no one should persuade her to degrade herself by asking a favour of Edward Chrughton. He had chosen to hold himself aloof from her, and she would show him that she could live without him. When she left Chrughton Abbey, they would part as strangers.

So the night closed, and at breakfast next morning I heard that Edward had started for Wycherly soon after daybreak. His absence made, for me at least, a sad blank in our circle. For one other also, I think; for Miss Tremaine's fair proud face was very pale, though she tried to seem gayer than usual,

and exerted herself in quite an unaccustomed manner in her endeavour to be agreeable to every one.

The days passed slowly for me after my cousin's departure. There was a weight upon my mind, a vague anxiety, which I struggled in vain to shake off. The house, full as it was of pleasant people, seemed to me to have become dull and dreary now that Edward was gone. The place where he had sat appeared always vacant to my eyes, though another filled it, and there was no gap on either side of the long dinner-table. Light-hearted young men still made the billiard-room resonant with their laughter; merry girls flirted as gaily as ever, undisturbed in the smallest degree by the absence of the heir of the house. Yet for me all was changed. A morbid fancy had taken complete possession of me. I found myself continually brooding over the housekeeper's words; those words which had told me that the shadows I had seen boded death and sorrow to the house of Chrington.

My cousins, Sophy and Agnes, were no more concerned about their brother's welfare than were their guests. They were full of excitement about the New-Year's ball, which was to be a very grand affair. Every one of importance within fifty miles was to be

present, every nook and corner of the Abbey would be filled with visitors coming from a great distance, while others were to be billeted upon the better class of tenantry round about. Altogether the organisation of this affair was no small business; and Mrs. Chrigh-ton's mornings were broken by discussions with the housekeeper, messages from the cook, interviews with the head-gardener on the subject of floral decorations, and other details, which all alike demanded the attention of the châtelaine herself. With these duties, and with the claims of her numerous guests, my cousin Fanny's time was so fully occupied, that she had little leisure to indulge in anxious feelings about her son, whatever secret uneasiness may have been lurking in her maternal heart. As for the master of the Abbey, he spent so much of his time in the library, where, under the pretext of business with his bailiff, he read Greek, that it was not easy for any one to discover what he did feel. Once, and once only, I heard him speak of his son, in a tone that betrayed an intense eagerness for his return.

The girls were to have new dresses from a French milliner in Wigmore-street; and as the great event drew near, bulky packages of millinery were continually arriving, and feminine consultations and ex-

positions of finery were being held all day long in bed-rooms and dressing-rooms with closed doors. Thus, with a mind always troubled by the same dark shapeless foreboding, I was perpetually being called upon to give an opinion about pink tulle and lilies of the valley, or maize silk and apple-blossoms.

New-Year's morning came at last, after an interval of abnormal length, as it seemed to me. It was a bright clear day, an almost spring-like sunshine lighting up the leafless landscape. The great dining-room was noisy with congratulations and good wishes as we assembled for breakfast on this first morning of a new year, after having seen the old one out cheerily the night before; but Edward had not yet returned, and I missed him sadly. Some touch of sympathy drew me to the side of Julia Tremaine on this particular morning. I had watched her very often during the last few days, and I had seen that her cheek grew paler every day. To-day her eyes had the dull heavy look that betokens a sleepless night. Yes, I was sure that she was unhappy—that the proud relentless nature suffered bitterly.

‘He must be home to-day,’ I said to her in a low voice, as she sat in stately silence before an untasted breakfast.

‘Who must?’ she answered, turning towards me with a cold distant look.

‘My cousin Edward. You know he promised to be back in time for the ball.’

‘I know nothing of Mr. Chrughton’s intended movements,’ she said in her haughtiest tone; ‘but of course it is only natural that he should be here to-night. He would scarcely care to insult half the county by his absence, however little he may value those now staying in his father’s house.’

‘But you know that there is one here whom he does value better than any one else in the world, Miss Tremaine,’ I answered, anxious to soothe this proud girl.

‘I know nothing of the kind. But why do you speak so solemnly about his return? He will come, of course. There is no reason he should not come.’

She spoke in a rapid manner that was strange to her, and looked at me with a sharp inquiring glance, that touched me somehow, it was so unlike herself—it revealed to me so keen an anxiety.

‘No, there is no reasonable cause for anything like uneasiness,’ I said; ‘but you remember what I told you the other night. That has preyed upon my

mind, and it will be an unspeakable relief to me when I see my cousin safe at home.'

'I am sorry that you should indulge in such weakness, Miss Chrighton.'

That was all she said; but when I saw her in the drawing-room after breakfast, she had established herself in a window that commanded a view of the long drive leading to the front of the Abbey. From this point she could not fail to see any one approaching the house. She sat there all day; every one else was more or less busy with arrangements for the evening, or at any rate occupied with an appearance of business; but Julia Tremaine kept her place by the window, pleading a headache as an excuse for sitting still, with a book in her hand, all day, yet obstinately refusing to go to her room and lie down, when her mother entreated her to do so.

'You will be fit for nothing to-night, Julia,' Mrs. Tremaine said, almost angrily; 'you have been looking ill for ever so long, and to-day you are as pale as a ghost.'

I knew that she was watching for *him*; and I pitied her with all my heart, as the day wore itself out, and he did not come.

We dined earlier than usual, played a game or

two of billiards after dinner, made a tour of inspection through the bright rooms, lit with wax-candles only, and odorous with exotics; and then came a long interregnum devoted to the arts and mysteries of the toilet; while maids flitted to and fro laden with frilled muslin petticoats from the laundry, and a faint smell of singed hair pervaded the corridors. At ten o'clock the band were tuning their violins, and pretty girls and elegant-looking men were coming slowly down the broad oak staircase, while the sound of fast-coming wheels grew louder, and stentorian voices announced the best people in the county.

I have no need to dwell upon the details of that evening's festival. It was very much like other balls—a brilliant success, a night of splendour and enchantment for those whose hearts were light and happy, and who could abandon themselves utterly to the pleasure of the moment; a far-away picture of fair faces and bright-hued dresses, a wearisome kaleidoscopic procession of form and colour for those whose minds were weighed down with the burden of a hidden care.

For me the music had no melody, the dazzling scene no charm. Hour after hour went by; supper was over, and the waltzers were enjoying those latest extra

dances which always seem the most delightful, and yet Edward Chrington had not appeared amongst us.

There had been innumerable inquiries about him, and Mrs. Chrington had apologised for his absence as best she might. Poor soul, I well knew that his non-return was now a source of poignant anxiety to her, although she greeted all her guests with the same gracious smile, and was able to talk gaily and well upon every subject. Once, when she was sitting alone for a few minutes, watching the dancers, I saw the smile fade from her face, and a look of anguish come over it. I ventured to approach her at this moment, and never shall I forget the look which she turned towards me.

‘My son, Sarah!’ she said in a low voice—‘something has happened to my son!’

I did my best to comfort her; but my own heart was growing heavier and heavier, and my attempt was a very poor one.

Julia Tremaine had danced a little at the beginning of the evening, to keep up appearances, I believe, in order that no one might suppose that she was distressed by her lover’s absence; but after the first two or three dances she pronounced herself tired, and withdrew to a seat amongst the matrons. She

was looking very lovely, in spite of her extreme palor, dressed in white tulle, a perfect cloud of airy puffings, and with a wreath of ivy-leaves and diamonds crowning her pale golden hair.

The night waned, the dancers were revolving in the last waltz, when I happened to look towards the doorway at the end of the room. I was startled by seeing a man standing there, with his hat in his hand, not in evening costume; a man with a pale anxious-looking face, peering cautiously into the room. My first thought was of evil; but in the next moment the man had disappeared, and I saw no more of him.

I lingered by my cousin Fanny's side till the rooms were empty. Even Sophy and Aggy had gone off to their own apartments, their airy dresses sadly dilapidated by a night's vigorous dancing. There were only Mr. and Mrs. Chrington and myself in the long suite of rooms, where the flowers were drooping and the wax-lights dying out one by one in the silver sconces against the walls.

'I think the evening went off very well,' Fanny said, looking rather anxiously at her husband, who was stretching himself and yawning with an air of intense relief.

‘Yes, the affair went off well enough. But Edward has committed a terrible breach of manners by not being here. Upon my word, the young men of the present day think of nothing but their own pleasures. I suppose that something especially attractive was going on at Wycherly to-day, and he couldn’t tear himself away.’

‘It is so unlike him to break his word,’ Mrs. Chrughton answered. ‘You are not alarmed, Frederick? You don’t think that anything has happened—any accident?’

‘What should happen? Ned is one of the best riders in the county. I don’t think there’s any fear of his coming to grief.’

‘He might be ill.’

‘Not he. He’s a young Hercules. And if it were possible for him to be ill—which it is not—we should have had a message from Wycherly.’

The words were scarcely spoken when Truefold, the old butler, stood by his master’s side with a solemn anxious face.

‘There is a—a person who wishes to see you, sir,’ he said in a low voice, ‘alone.’

Low as the words were, both Fanny and myself heard them.

‘Some one from Wycherly?’ she exclaimed. ‘Let him come here.’

‘But, madam, the person most particularly wished to see master alone.—Shall I show him into the library, sir? The lights are not out there.’

‘Then it is some one from Wycherly,’ said my cousin, seizing my wrist with a hand that was icy cold. ‘Didn’t I tell you so, Sarah? Something has happened to my son. Let the person come here, Truefold, here; I insist upon it.’

The tone of command was quite strange in a wife who was always deferential to her husband, in a mistress who was ever gentle to her servants.

‘Let it be so, Truefold,’ said Mr. Chrington. ‘Whatever ill news has come to us we will hear together.’

He put his arm round his wife’s waist. Both were pale as marble, both stood in stony stillness waiting for the blow that was to fall upon them.

The stranger, the man I had seen in the doorway, came in. He was curate of Wycherly church, and chaplain to Sir Francis Wycherly; a grave middle-aged man. He told what he had to tell with all kindness, with all the usual forms of consolation which Christianity and an experience of sorrow could

suggest. Vain words, wasted trouble. The blow must fall, and earthly consolation was unable to lighten it by a feather's weight.

There had been a steeplechase at Wycherly—an amateur affair with gentlemen riders—on that bright New-Year's day, and Edward Chrington had been persuaded to ride his favourite hunter Pepperbox. There would be plenty of time for him to return to Chrington after the races. He had consented; and his horse was winning easily, when, at the last fence, a double one, with water beyond, Pepperbox baulked his leap, and went over head-foremost, flinging his rider over a hedge into a field close beside the course, where there was a heavy stone roller. Upon this stone roller Edward Chrington had fallen, his head receiving the full force of the concussion. All was told. It was while the curate was relating the fatal catastrophe that I looked round suddenly, and saw Julia Tremaine standing a little way behind the speaker. She had heard all; she uttered no cry, she showed no signs of fainting, but stood calm and motionless, waiting for the end.

I know not how that night ended: there seemed an awful calm upon us all. A carriage was got ready, and Mr. and Mrs. Chrington started for Wycherly to

look upon their dead son. He had died while they were carrying him from the course to Sir Francis's house. I went with Julia Tremaine to her room, and sat with her while the winter morning dawned slowly upon us—a bitter dawning.

I have little more to tell. Life goes on, though hearts are broken. Upon Chrington Abbey there came a dreary time of desolation. The master of the house lived in his library, shut from the outer world, buried almost as completely as a hermit in his cell. I have heard that Julia Tremaine was never known to smile after that day. She is still unmarried, and lives entirely at her father's country house; proud and reserved in her conduct to her equals, but a very angel of mercy and compassion amongst the poor of the neighbourhood. Yes; this haughty girl, who once declared herself unable to endure the hovels of the poor, is now a Sister of Charity in all but the robe. So does a great sorrow change the current of a woman's life.

I have seen my cousin Fanny many times since that awful New-Year's night; for I have always the same welcome at the Abbey. I have seen her calm and cheerful, doing her duty, smiling upon her

daughter's children, the honoured mistress of a well-ordered household; but I know that the mainspring of life is broken, that for her there hath passed a glory from the earth, and that upon all the pleasures and joys of this world she looks with the solemn calm of one for whom all things are dark with the shadow of a great sorrow.

CHAPTER V

THE THREE TIMES

THREE TIMES

THREE TIMES

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST TIME.

‘POSITIVELY the last night of Herr Rudolph Prusinowski and the performing lions! Positively the last night! For the benefit of Herr Rudolph Prusinowski. Under the distinguished patronage of their Majesties Queen Victoria, the Emperor of China, the Cham of Tartary, his Serene Highness the Grand Duke of Baden, Simeon Muddlebrain, Esq. M.P., the Mayor and Corporation of Spindlecum, and other august personages too numerous to mention. Come early. Positively the last time. Come and see the lions. Herr Rudolph Prusinowski, the favourite of crowned heads and the élite of Europe. Take notice! The great Prusinowski has had the honour of performing before the Mikado of Japan. The world-renowned Prusinowski has been decorated with the order of Rouge et Noir by the Grand Duchess of Selzerwasserburg. Don’t miss the lions!’

The above sentences, and many others of the same character—in which a picturesque fancy, aided by the experience of a public career, trifled with the sobrieties of fact and tripped lightly across the borderland of fiction—appeared in gigantic black letters upon a yellow poster on the side wall of the Queen's Theatre, Spindlecum, and in the streets and market-place, upon the quays, and in the back slums of the same town. Spindlecum was a large manufacturing town—a town that did a good deal of business in the export way, and had much commerce by land and sea; and Spindlecum could boast of two theatres: the Royal, an elegantly-appointed edifice in a side-street off the quay, with a stone portico surmounted by a bust of Shakespeare; a house about which elderly inhabitants of Spindlecum cherished traditions of Edmund Kean, and where Macready and Harley were remembered as stock actors, but a house which had never paid a manager within the memory of man: and the Queen's, a vast barn-like building, with a lofty roof supported by iron girders, three tiers of boxes, and Alpine heights in the way of galleries, which, contemplated from the broad valley of the pit, seemed inaccessible to the foot of man. The Queen's was making a fortune for its managers. There was

a sixpenny pit, and there was a threepenny gallery, whereby the house was never empty, and on Mondays and Saturdays overflowed with noisy human life. The audience at the Queen's was critical, but on the whole good-natured; requiring plenty of life and movement in the pieces, and what may be called showy action in the performers. The Queen's liked stars, and was tolerably universal in its appreciation of these luminaries: this week clamorous in their applause of some stalwart Othello or loud-voiced Hamlet, next week gaping entranced upon the contortions of a family of acrobats; now crowding to see Mr. Reginald Montmorency and his celebrated mare Black Bess in the grand spectacular drama of *Dick Turpin, or the Ride to York*, anon rushing to behold Signor Poloni and his striped Zebra of the Prairie.

A man with a pale sallow face, blue chin, and close-cut hair sat in a lounging attitude upon a low wall opposite the stage-door of the Queen's, smoking a meditative pipe, and contemplating the big yellow poster with a dreamy fondness. He had a little group of satellites about him, also close-cropped, blue-chinned, and tobacco-consuming; minor lights in the dramatic heaven, the stock company of the Queen's, who were thrown a little into the background by the

lions, shuffling through a preliminary melodrama nightly, before an audience who beheld them with impatience, and heard them sometimes with derision, eager for the grand business of the evening.

‘I think that ought to hit ’em up,’ said the Herr thoughtfully (he spoke excellent English for a foreigner, but seemed scarcely to have acquired the language in the most aristocratic or æsthetic circles). ‘The Mikado looks well, doesn’t he?’

‘First rate,’ replied Mr. de la Zouche, the walking gentleman. ‘Was he a nice kind of chap, the Mikado?’

Herr Prusinowski turned his contemplative eyes upon the inquirer with a look of placid scorn.

‘You ain’t so jolly green as to suppose I ever set eyes upon him,’ he said, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. ‘I was never in Japan in my life; never nearer than a japan candlestick. The Mikado is a safe card, he is; who’s to ask any questions about *him*? And so’s the Cham of Tartary; I always bring out them two for the last night. Queen Victoria’s legitimate business. I did perform once before the royal servants, and got a fiver from the royal seckitary. That is immediate patronage.’

‘I expect you’ll have a clipping house, cully,’ re-

marked Mr. Tiddikins, the low comedian, a small man with a falsetto voice.

‘I look forward to it, Tiddikins; and if it goes over eighty, I’ll stand a supper, mind that.’

There was a subdued murmur of applause.

‘Hot or cold?’ inquired Mr. de la Zouche.

‘Hot,’ replied the lion-tamer. ‘None of your cold fowls and ’am, your pastry and rubbish, for me. A sirloin of beef at top, and a prime goose at bottom, a veal pie and a stewed steak at the sides, and plenty of smoking hot vegetables; a prime old stilton and a bowl of salad to wind up with, and as much champagne as you can swallow, with brandy-and-water to settle it on your stomachs. That’s what I’ll do, at the Lion and Lamb, if the house goes over eighty when the half price to the boxes is in.’

This time the applause was louder.

‘I always said you were a jolly good fellow, Bill,’ said Mr. Tiddikins, ‘and I don’t mind how often I say it again.’

It is to be observed that Mr. Tiddikins addressed the distinguished Rudolph by the simpler cognomen Bill, one of the playful licenses of friendship, no doubt.

‘It’s wonderful how those animals draw,’ said Mr.

de la Zouche thoughtfully, as if he were contemplating the feasibility of setting-up on his own account as a lion-tamer. 'You've been here three seasons, Prusinowski, and, egad, the people ain't tired of 'em yet. They seem as eager as ever. One would suppose they liked to see a poor beggar hazard his life every night.'

'There's something in that,' replied the Herr. 'If it wasn't for the danger, the wild-beast business would be as flat as ditch-water.'

'Were you ever frightened?' asked the walking gentleman. 'I know what a plucky fellow you are, and that you handle those three brutes as if they were so many tabby cats; but still sometimes, you know, a man's nerve must fail. Come, now, Prusinowski, were you never frightened?'

'Never but once,' answered the lion-tamer, 'and then I thought it was all over with me.'

He grew suddenly grave, gloomy even, at the mere recollection waked by the walking gentleman's inquiry.

'Never but once,' he repeated, 'and God grant I never may be so again! When a man in my trade loses his head, it's all up with him.'

'How did it happen, old fellow?' asked Mr. Tidikins.

Herr Prusinowski stopped to fill his pipe before answering the question. It was four o'clock upon a blazing July afternoon, rehearsal was over, her Majesty's servants of the Queen's Theatre, Spindlecum, had dined in the intervals of the day's work at their several lodgings, and had nothing particular to do with themselves until tea-time. An actor of this class has generally a rooted aversion to going home.

'Well, you see,' the lion-tamer began in a leisurely way, stopping to take a few preliminary whiffs after those three words of prelude, 'I was at Manchester nigh upon five years ago, and it was my last night and my "ben," as it might be to-night.' A pause and a few more puffs. 'We was doing first-rate business, fizzing, and I don't think I was ever in such high spirits in my life. My pockets were stuffed with money that I'd been taking about the town for tickets, and I hadn't a place to let in my dress-circle.

"Why, Bill," says my little woman, when I kept running in and out of our lodgings between whiles at rehearsal—we was close agen the slum—taking her in a handful of money every time, "you seem as if you was bewitched; I don't like to see you like that. I had a Scotch friend once as said it was a bad sign—a sign of something going to happen."

“Lord love your little foolish heart,” I answered, “it’s a sign of nothing except that I’m going to have a screaming house to-night. I don’t suppose there’ll be a corner you can screw yourself into if you want to see me.” For she’s a rare one for going in front of a night, you know, is the missus.’

Mr. de la Zouche and Mr. Tiddikins murmured their acquaintance with this domestic fact. Herr Prusinowski smoked his pipe for a minute or so, and then went on:

““Why, there’s the family box!” she said.

‘That’s a large private box on the opposite prompt, that don’t often let, unless there’s Italian Opera, or Charles Mathews, or something out of the common.

“No, there ain’t,” I answered, laughing.

“What!” cried the missus, “is that let too?”

“Let this morning,” said I, “and there’s the money—three pound three—thirty-one-and-six of which comes to us.”

‘For I had a half share clear of expenses, same as here. Lizzie—that’s my wife, you know—was quite proud to think I was going to have such a good box audience, for it isn’t every box audience as will take to wild beasts. You may get schools and pious

people, that object to the drama, but consider a man putting his head into a lion's mouth improving—there's quite a run upon lions in the Scriptures—but as a rule, your boxes are shady. So my Liz was proud of my dress-circle that night.

“I wonder whether it's the mayor and his family,” she said, speculating about that big private box.

“No,” I told her, “it's a gentleman and a stranger, no name.”

‘Well, the night came, a sweltering hot summer evening, such as it will be to-night. The performances began with one of your talkee-talkee genteel comedies, and the house was so full and noisy the actors couldn't hear themselves speak. They got through it somehow, there was a short overture, and then the curtain went up for my performance. The three lions discovered in a forest, to slow music, which gets a round for *them*, and gives me my entrance and reception.

‘You know the beasts, they were the same three I've got now—Brown, Jones, and Robinson. Old Brown's a harmless old chap enough, not a sound tooth in his head, and no more harm in him than in an elderly jackass; Jones is a deep old dodger, but there isn't *much* harm in him; but Robinson's a

nasty-tempered beast, a brute you never can be sure of, an animal that will lick your hand one minute, and be ready to snap your head off the next.

‘Well, I got a first-rate reception; I thought the gallery would have never left off applauding; and the sight of the house, crammed to the ceiling, made me almost giddy. Perhaps it was the heat of the place, which was like an oven; perhaps, as I’d been standing treat or being stood for off and on pretty well all day, I may have taken a little more than was good for me; anyhow, I felt the house spinning round me, just as if I’d been some duffer or a novice, instead of the old stager I am.

‘I looked at the family box o.p., curious to see who’d taken it. There was only one gentleman there, a man of fifty or thereabouts, with a cadaverous lantern-jawed face, and light reddish hair, very straight, combed neatly on each side of his forehead. He was dressed in black, regular evening dress, white choker and all complete, and, do you know, the instant I set eyes upon that man, he gave me a turn.’

‘That was a queer fancy,’ said Mr. de la Zouche, helping himself to tobacco from the Herr’s gutta percha pouch, which lay open on the wall.

‘Perhaps it was; but if that night was to come

over again, I should have the fancy over again,' replied Prusinowski. 'It was partly his own looks, I think, partly the way he looked at me; not like the rest of the audience, all good nature, expecting to be amused, but with a steadfast ravenous kind of look, that made my blood run cold. "That's a man who'd like to see something happen to me," I said to myself.

'I didn't give way to the fancy all at once. I began the performance; but I stole a glance at my sandy-haired pale-faced gentleman now and then, and always found him looking at me in the same way. He had large light-gray eyes, very light, and very prominent. I can see them now, and they followed every move I made, like a cat's following a mouse. He never moved his eyes from me, he never smiled, he never applauded; he sat in a half-crouching attitude, leaning over the front of the box, watching me, and he made me feel as if I had a ton weight tied to each of my legs. Everything went well for some time, though I felt I'd never done things worse. Brown and Jones behaved beautifully; but just towards the last, when I had to put my head into Robinson's mouth to bring down the curtain, I saw that the brute was in one of his nasty tempers. I

suppose the heat had put him out—I know the perspiration was pouring down my face—or perhaps *he* didn't like the look of that cadaverous gentleman in the private box. Anyhow, he turned nasty, and when I wanted to collar him bounced away from me.

'The house turned as still as death all in a moment, and I could see the audience was frightened. I gave a look at my gentleman in the box. He was leaning a little farther over the cushion, with something like a smile on his face. Such a smile; I could fancy any one going to see a man hung smiling like that.

"Bray to not pe vrighened, laties and shentlemens," I said in my broken English (old Sauerkraut, the ophecleid at the Lane, taught me that dodge), "id is nozing. Te peast vill to all I veesh;" and then I gave Robinson a pretty smart cuff, and began to drag his jaws open.

'The brute snarled, turned upon me, and in the next instant would have had his teeth in my shoulder, if I hadn't given the signal for the curtain. Half-a-dozen carpenters rushed upon the stage and helped me to tackle him. We had him safe in less than a minute; but just at that one moment, before the curtain dropped, it was as near as a toucher.

‘ There was a good deal of applause ; not that I’d done anything to deserve it, for the business of putting my head in the brute’s mouth was in the bill, and the audience had been swindled out of that ; but they evidently knew I’d been in danger, and they called me before the curtain. I looked up at that white-faced devil in the private box. He was standing up, rubbing his hands in a satisfied kind of way, as if he had seen what he wanted to see ; and as I passed just under him he said in a slow measured voice that gave me the shivers,

“ A narrow escape, Herr. Very well done indeed ! I congratulate you.”

‘ I gave him a look, which he ought to have understood if he didn’t, made my bow to the house, and went off the stage. Robinson was quiet enough by this time. My man Joe Purdy had walked him off to his box, and there he was growling over his shin-bones, as mild a lion as you’d wish to see. “ Only let me get you safe back to London, my friend,” says I, “ and I’ll take you down to Jam-rack’s and swop you for something better tempered. Talent is all very well ; but temper’s worth all the talent in the world.” However, that’s five years ago, and there’s Robinson still performing with me. The

brute has such a wonderful gift for his profession ! and his heart and soul's in it too. Take that animal in the middle of the day, when he ain't particular hungry, and he's a decent fellow enough ; but come between him and his business, and you'll find out what a lion is. He's the vainest beast out, and cuts up rough if he don't get a round of applause for every trick he does. But, Lord bless you, there's no such thing as genius without vanity. He's been a fortune to me first and last, has that animal. Brown and Jones are nothing more than supers to him.'

'You didn't see any more of your friend in the box?' inquired Mr. de la Zouche, who was not particularly interested in these praises of the gifted Robinson.

'Curse him, no ! By the time I'd changed my clothes he had left the house. I went round to the box-office to see if the box-keepers could tell me anything about him. No ; he was a stranger. He had taken his box that morning, finding there was no stall to be had, and paid his three guineas without a question.

'Now I daresay you'll think me an out-and-out fool when I tell you I couldn't sleep that night, nor

many nights after, for thinking of that man. I couldn't get his pale cheeks and lank jaws and light gray eyes, with that horrid gloating look in them, out of my mind. "That's a fellow who'd go to see a man hung," I said to myself. "That's a man who'd stand by to see his fellow-creatures hung, drawn, and quartered, and enjoy it—especially the drawing." I hadn't a doubt in my mind that he was on the look-out for an accident all the evening; I hadn't a doubt in my mind that it was through him I made a mess of it at the end.'

'Did you never see him again?' asked the low comedian.

'Never; God forbid I ever should, for I've a notion that if I did, it would be the death of me. I'm not a nervous man in a general way, nor superstitious either; but I'd give up the biggest haul I ever made by a benefit rather than act before that man.'

'A queer notion,' said the humorous Tiddikins.

'A very queer notion,' echoed the gentlemanly De la Zouche.

He was not a fine actor, the walking gentleman, belonging rather to that class of performer who is contemptuously likened to a stick, and his dramatic

path had been by no means strewn with roses; yet he was fain to congratulate himself that it had not been beset by lions. He had been somewhat inclined to envy Rudolph Prusinowski the distinction and prosperity of his career; but just now it occurred to him that there were two sides to the picture. He rubbed his shoulder thoughtfully, and was glad to think that he was exposed to the assaults of no fiercer animals than those rampant tragedians who snubbed him when he played Horatio, and made light of him in Cassio, but who melted a little on their benefit nights, and treated him to beer.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECOND TIME.

THE Spindlecum people showed their appreciation of the British drama as represented by lion-taming by giving Herr Prusinowski a bumper. Whether it was the influence of the Cham of Tartary, or the Mikado, the Grand Duchess of Selzerwasserburg, or the local member, or the simple merits of the performance, is a moot question ; but the Spindlecumians assembled in full force ; and before the Herr had left the family tea-table to repair to the theatre, he received the pleasing intelligence that the crowd at the pit and gallery doors was half-way across the street.

‘ If we only go on like this for another year or so, Liz, I’ll cut the profession,’ exclaimed Herr Prusinowski cheerily, ‘ and start a theatrical public, somewhere on the Surrey side. It’s a trying life is the wild-beast business.’

‘And a dangerous life too, William,’ said the little woman, with a sigh.

(The renowned Rudolph’s name in private life was William.)

‘Not much of that, old girl. I’m more than a match for Robinson by this time. There isn’t a move he’s up to that I’m not down upon; and he’s the cunningest beast that ever picked a bone. You’re going into the front to-night, eh, Liz?’

‘O yes, I shall get a seat at the back of the boxes. Mrs. Prodger’s going with me. She’s took her ticket, and paid for it, you know, William, like a lady.’

Mrs. Prodger was the Prusinowski’s landlady, a ponderous matron of fifty, who had let lodgings to ‘theatricals’ for the last twenty years.

‘Ta-ta, Liz, then; I’m off.’

‘It’s early, William. There’s the *Miller and his Men*—that’ll last an hour and a half, surely.’

‘I don’t believe it’ll play an hour. You ought to know what my benefit audiences are—all agog for the lions. I want to have a look at the beasts before I begin, and I’m always a little nervous on my ben. Good-bye.’

This was a mere conjugal excuse. The theatre

to a man bred at the side-scenes is his club. The Herr preferred smoking his pipe in the free-and-easy atmosphere of the dressing-room at the Queen's to the tamer delights of the domestic tea-table. He had very little anxiety about his beasts. Joe Purdy, his factotum, a keeper who had served his apprenticeship with the great Wombwell, had the custody of them.

The house was an excellent one. The boxes were not so well filled as on that memorable night at Manchester, which Herr Prusinowski had described to his friends; but the pit was a seething caldron of humanity, the gallery looked like a wall of eager faces piled one upon the other up to the iron roof. The *Miller and his Men* was performed almost in dumb show, or seemed so to be, though the leading tragedian retained on the establishment was roaring himself hoarse in the character of Grindoff, with a faint hope of snatching a stray leaf from the crown of wild olive which would be cast at the feet of the lion-tamer by and by.

Grindoff did not bate a syllable of his part or the minutest detail of his stage business; not a stamp of his russet boot, or a scowl of his heavily-corked eyebrows; but the rest of the company, less enthu-

siastic, scamped their work to the best of their abilities, and the drama was raced through in one hour ten minutes and seven seconds by the prompter's chronograph.

Then came a stirring overture—the 'Bronze Horse'—during which the audience cracked nuts and became momentarily more excited; and then the act-drop rose to slow music of a soul-appalling character, and revealed Brown, Jones, and Robinson picturesquely grouped in the stock primeval forest.

There was a pause. The house applauded vociferously. There was something stirring in the notion that these three unfettered beasts might leap into the pit at any moment. It was quite a pleasant sensation—especially for the gallery. Brown, who was elderly and decrepit, yawned and stretched himself out as if for slumber, with the air of having been untimely disturbed from his after-dinner nap. Jones, who was of a lively temperament, whisked his tail, and snapped at an imaginary fly. Robinson stared full at the audience, as if he really did understand and appreciate their plaudits.

The music quickened, broke into a stirring march, and then, at a fortissimo chord from the full orchestra, the lion-tamer bounded on to the stage—a

striking figure, broad-shouldered and muscular, in close-fitting flesh-coloured raiment, a scarlet girdle round his waist, and a leopard's skin over his shoulder.

There was a good strong Sheffield knife in his belt, but he had no appearance of being armed.

His reception was tremendous. He stood bowing and moving his lips in vague murmurs, with an air of being quite overcome by his feelings, for nearly five minutes before he could begin his performance. His eyes wandered all round the house with the gaze of calculation, till they grew suddenly fixed, glaring at the stalls.

Now the stalls at the Queen's Theatre, Spindlecum, were a delusion and a snare. Spindlecum at its best was not an aristocratic town, and the Queen's was not the aristocratic theatre of Spindlecum. Except on a mayor's bespeak or under masonic patronage, the stalls were rarely tenanted. But there they were, two long rows of partitioned seats, covered with dusty red cloth.

To-night there were three people in all the length and breadth of them—two faded-looking elderly women in opera-cloaks at one end, and in the middle, in a position that commanded every inch of the stage,

a middle-aged man, with a cadaverous face, prominent light-gray eyes, and lank reddish hair, carefully dressed in full evening costume.

He sat in an attitude of extreme attention, with his arms folded on the back of the seat in front of him—he was in the back row—and his eyes fixed upon the lion-tamer. For the moment the sight of him seemed to turn Rudolph Prusinowski to stone. It was the man he had been talking of that day.

The cold sweat broke out upon his forehead; but he stamped his foot savagely, angry with himself for this folly, muttered an oath, and began his business with the lions—standing upon their backs, riding round the stage upon all three at once, leading them through a kind of dance movement, described in the bills as a set of quadrilles, with garlands of paper roses, and otherwise disporting himself with them, the red-haired man in the stalls watching his every movement and every movement of the animals breathlessly, and never stirring by a hair's-breadth from his attentive attitude, or turning his eyes away from the stage.

Then came the feature of the evening—a single combat between Herr Prusinowski and Robinson—who was described in the bills, by the way, as 'Mo-

loch, the royal brindled lion, presented to Herr Prusinowski by one of the native princes of the Punjab'—at the end of which the Herr dragged asunder the animal's jaws, and put his head into the red-hot-looking mouth.

To-night, in spite of that deadly terror which had come upon the Herr at the sight of that one detested spectator, everything went smoothly enough. Robinson, otherwise Moloch, kept his temper, suffered his jaws to be opened to their widest extent, and the tamer's head to repose upon his tongue as on a pillow for half-a-dozen seconds or so, and the curtain came down to vociferous applause; but when the *bénéficiaire* was called for, there was no response. The prompter found him leaning against one of the wings, white to the lips.

'Did you ever see a man tremble?' he asked, in a voice that shook so much as to be scarcely intelligible. 'If you want to see one, look at me.'

He was shaking in every limb, like a man stricken with ague.

'Why, what's the matter, cully?' asked the prompter, with more friendliness of tone than elegance of diction. 'They're calling for you like mad. You'd better go on.'

‘I’m going as soon as I can steady myself. I never neglect my business; but I’ve had a turn. I never thought I should come off the stage alive to-night.’

‘Why, the animals were quiet enough.’

‘Yes, as mild as lambs; but there’s a man in front that’s my evil genius. I never felt superstitious about anything else before—none of your ghosts or that kind of rot—but I’ve got my fancy about that man. He’d like to see me killed, and—he’ll contrive to see it.’

‘Prusinowski,’ said the prompter, ‘I couldn’t have believed it of you. I thought you was a man of sense.’

But the prompter felt uncomfortable nevertheless. The human mind is especially open to uncomfortable sensations of this kind.

‘Come, my boy,’ he exclaimed, ‘they’re losing temper.’ This in allusion to the audience, who were clamouring hoarsely for their favourite. ‘You’d better go on.’

Prusinowski wiped his damp forehead, pulled himself together, as it were.

‘All right,’ he said, and followed the prompter to the first entrance, and went through the narrow

opening which that functionary made for him by pulling the heavy drop-scene a little on one side. He went on, made his accustomed mechanical bow, and crossed the stage, to disappear with renewed bowings on the opposite side. He was looking at the stalls all the time. The man was gone.

‘Curse him!’ muttered the lion-tamer. ‘If he’d given me time to change my clothes, I’d have been in front of the house in time to see him come out. I want to know who he is; I want to know what he means.’

He dressed hurriedly, tearing off his close-fitting garb, and shuffling on the costume of everyday life anyhow, and then went back to the prompt entrance before the curtain had risen for the farce, and took another survey of the stalls, thinking it just possible that his evil genius had returned. But the man’s place was empty. There were only the two dreary women, waiting meekly for one of the stalest inanest farces known to dramatic literature, and fanning themselves with their pocket-handkerchiefs.

Herr Prusinowski went round to the public doors of the theatre, and hung about there, with a vague idea that the man might be lingering also. There was a large tavern just opposite the Queen’s, where

the audience were wont to refresh themselves—even the stalls and boxes—with brandy-and-soda. The Herr crossed the road by and by, went into the crowded bar, still looking for his man, and looking vainly.

While he was staring about him a friendly hand tapped him on the shoulder.

‘It was well over eighty, my boy,’ said the voice of De la Zouche, upon whose youthful cheek still lingered some trace of the vermilion it had worn in the *Miller and his Men*, and whose upper lip was still stiff with the glue that had secured his horsehair moustache. ‘Nearer ninety, Tiddikins tells me, and he knows how to reckon up a house with any man in the profession. I wish you joy.’

‘Thank you, old fellow,’ replied the lion-tamer vaguely. ‘Yes, I think it’s a good house.’

‘Think! There’s no room for thinking. The perspiration was running down their faces in the pit all through the *Miller*. The house was like a furnace; and uncommonly thirsty that kind of thing makes a man. The pongelow you sent in was very acceptable. I thought Fitz Raymond would never have taken his head out of the pewter. He’s awful coally on his Grindoff—goes in a perisher, even

when he can't hear himself speak for the noise in front. But I say, Prusi, how about the little supper you talked of?' This in an insinuating tone.

Prusinowski stared at him blankly for a moment, and then said carelessly,

'The supper—O, to be sure. I'd forgotten all about it.' The noble countenance of De la Zouche fell, and his open brow was overshadowed by a sudden gloom. 'But it's all right,' continued the *bénéficiaire*. 'It's ordered for twelve o'clock sharp. I ordered it on spec. I thought I should have a good house.'

'Prusinowski, you are a gentleman!' exclaimed the actor. 'You are one of Nature's nobility, sir, and daily contact with the brute creation has not degraded your lofty mind. At twelve sharp. I'll go home and put on a clean collar. I think you mentioned a goose?'

'Roast beef at the top, roast goose at the bottom,' said the Herr absently.

'It is a bird which, on the supper-table, I appreciate above any of the feathered tribe,' replied the walking gentleman. '*Au reservoir.*'

He departed, wondering at the silence and gravity of a man who could draw an eighty-pound house.

Herr Prusinowski left the tavern and strolled listlessly along the street. It was not quite eleven. He had a clear hour before him, in which he could do what he pleased with himself. Under ordinary circumstances he might have gone home, to have a few words with his 'little woman,' and make some amendment in his toilet; but to-night he hardly cared to face his wife. She would see that something was wrong, and question him. The impression that man's appearance had made upon him was a subject he did not want to talk about, not even with her. He turned out of the busy thoroughfare in which the Queen's Theatre was situated presently into a broad, quiet, old-fashioned-looking street leading down to the quay—a street of broad square red-brick houses of the Georgian era, grim and respectable, with a shop only here and there, and then a superior class of shop. It was a very quiet street at this time of night. The summer moon was shining full upon the broad pavement and empty road, and there was just a glimpse of moonlit water at the end of the street where it opened on the quay.

There was only one shop open at this hour, a tobacconist's at a corner. Prusinowski felt in his coat-pocket with a dim recollection of having allowed

Mr. Fitz Raymond to empty his tobacco-pouch that evening, and then strolled across the road towards the tobacconist's shop. While he was in the act of crossing, a man came out of the shop and walked slowly away towards the quay. The lion-tamer recognised him at a glance, and darted after him. It was the occupant of the stalls, a tall angular figure in the moonlight, with more or less the air of a gentleman.

It was an unjustifiable thing to do, of course; but Rudolph Prusinowski did not stop to consider the etiquette of the situation. He was resolved to accost this man. He would have done the same wherever he had met him.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, at the stranger's shoulder, 'I believe you were in front to-night in the stalls at the Queen's?'

The man turned and faced him. It was not a prepossessing countenance by any means, that long cadaverous visage, with the pale prominent eyes and lank sandy hair. The moonlight made it look more than usually cadaverous.

'Yes,' he said, 'I have been at the Queen's Theatre this evening. Dear me! you are the lion-tamer, I believe. This is really curious!'

He spoke in a formal deliberate way that was strangely irritating to Herr Prusinowski's nerves. These artists—even professors of the lowest arts—are apt to be sensitive.

‘You have some kind of business with me, Herr Prusinowski?’ the stranger said interrogatively, the lion-tamer standing for the moment staring at him like a newly-awakened sleep-walker, utterly lost and helpless.

‘I—I wanted to ask you a question,’ he said abruptly, rousing himself with an effort. ‘This isn’t the first time I’ve seen you. You took a private box at Manchester five years ago for my benefit.’

‘I did,’ replied the stranger. ‘I congratulate you on the possession of an excellent memory, Mr. Prusinowski. You had a narrow escape that night at Manchester, I imagine. One of your animals turned restive.’

‘Yes,’ said the lion-tamer moodily, ‘that brute Robinson cut up rough. I lost my nerve, and he saw it. It *was* a narrow escape—a disappointment for you, wasn’t it?’

‘Excuse me, I hardly catch your meaning.’

‘You thought it was all over with me, didn’t you? Come now, I want to know your motive for coming

to see me that time—I want to know your motive for coming to see me to-night.'

'Motive?' repeated the stranger. 'I should suppose the motive must be sufficiently obvious. People generally attend that sort of entertainment, and every sort of entertainment, in search of amusement.'

'Other people, perhaps—not you. I know what a man's face means, and I watched yours, as close—well, almost as close as you watched me. It wasn't the face of a man that came to be amused.'

'You seem to have a peculiar way of looking at things, Mr. Prusinowski,' replied the stranger, rubbing his bony close-shaven chin thoughtfully. 'However, to be candid with you, I am somewhat interested in lion-taming. I am an idle man, you see. My means enable me to live pretty much as I please and where I please, and a man without occupation is in a manner compelled to create an interest for himself in things outside his own life. I am an amateur of wild-beast shows. There was a man called Green—you may have heard of him, perhaps. I saw that man Green perform seventeen consecutive times. I was peculiarly interested in him.'

'Yes,' said Prusinowski, 'I know all about Green.'

He was killed—killed by a tiger that he'd made a good deal of money out of.'

'He was,' answered the stranger; 'I saw it.'

Herr Prusinowski shuddered.

'I thought so,' he said; 'I thought as much. You've tasted blood.'

'Upon my honour, that is a very unpleasant way of putting it,' replied the stranger. 'I look at these things entirely from an artistic point of view. I have heard it asserted that men of your profession always do meet with some fatal accident sooner or later. Since you push me so closely, I am bound to admit that has formed one element of interest for me in this kind of performance. I can understand the delight of the Roman people, from the emperor down to the humblest freedman, in their gladiatorial shows. I have a somewhat classical turn of mind, perhaps, and am proud to acknowledge a taste which connects me with a classic age.'

'I don't understand half that palaver,' said Herr Prusinowski rudely; 'but I trust in God I may never see your face again.'

'Really, now! but why?'

'Because you are a cold-blooded scoundrel, and you would like to see me killed.'

‘My dear Mr. Prusinowski, that is a style of language which, if I were an ill-tempered man, I might resent. Happily I am not an ill-tempered man, so let it pass. You have no right to remark that I should like to see you killed by one of those brutes of yours. But if you *are* destined to meet your death in that manner, which it is to be hoped you are not, I freely admit that I should wish to be a spectator of the catastrophe. It would not make the smallest difference to you, and it would be highly interesting to me. Is this your way? No? In that case, good-night.’

He lifted his hat ceremoniously, and departed towards the patch of moonlit water at the end of the street, leaving the lion-tamer standing on the pavement, transfixed and brooding.

It was just as he had imagined—the man was an amateur of sudden death.

The supper at the Lion and Lamb public-house—a snug little hostelry five doors from the theatre, and much affected by the actors—was a gastronomic success, but not a social one. The fare was excellent. The giver of the feast ordered liquors on a liberal scale, and eatables and drinkables disappeared with a

celerity cheering to witness. Yet the banquet was not a cheerful one. Nothing could rouse Prusinowski from the gloom that had fallen upon him. The actors did their utmost to beguile him into gaiety, with boisterous talk and laughter, racy anecdotes, and an unlimited amount of that humorous converse commonly known as 'chaff,' to which the theatrical mind is especially prone ; but all their efforts failed. Once or twice he did make some faint show of rallying—gave a smart answer or two, threw a lobster-claw at the tragic and dignified Fitz Raymond when that great artist was engaged in argument, and pushed a stick of celery down the coat-collar of the absent-minded De la Zouche. But these were the feeblest spurts of gaiety, and by degrees the talk fell flat, and the revels, which under happier auspices would have lasted far into the summer dawning, broke up abruptly at a quarter past two.

Mr. Warbeck the prompter walked home with Tiddikins and De la Zouche, and told them what had happened after the fall of the curtain.

'Prusinowski's as good a fellow as ever breathed,' he said in conclusion, being thoroughly warmed through with gin-and-water. 'If he was my own brother, I could not like him better than I

do. But I'm afraid there's something queer hereabouts.'

He tapped his forehead significantly.

'A loose slate,' said Mr. Tiddikins.

'A bee in his bonnet,' said Mr. de la Zouche.

CHAPTER III.

THE THIRD TIME.

It was three years later in the life of the lion-tamer, and he was performing for three nights only at a sea-coast town in the north of England, a dreary little place enough, whither he had strayed from the rich manufacturing districts where his harvests were wont to be so plenteous—a dismal little town, beside which the sea seemed to howl more dolefully than by other shores ; a stony High-street, a damp windy fish-market, a beach of great loose pebbles, and a long wooden jetty stretching out to sea, and slippery always with slime and weed, dead fish, and other refuse of the great ocean.

Three years!—and yet on his benefit night at Spindlecum Herr Prusinowski had talked about retiring on his laurels in a year. He had not been doing badly either ; prosperity had followed all his

wanderings; but the human mind is elastic in its estimate of money, and Herr Prusinowski's notions of the fortune he ought to retire upon had widened with the passage of time.

'Another six months, little woman,' he said, 'and I'll sell the beasts by auction, and take a public-house,' which was his notion of peace and retirement.

'I wish it was to be to-morrow, William,' the little woman answered sadly. 'I shall never know a happy moment till you've done with those animals.'

The first two nights at Lowshore, this obscure northern seaport, had been tolerably successful. The theatre was the mouldiest old barn perhaps that had ever been dedicated to public entertainment, and was opened about once in two years for a week or so of transient splendour, when some wandering star of the dramatic firmament, more wildly speculative than his brethren, essayed his fortunes at Lowshore, and informed the nobility and gentry of the district that he was about to appear for six nights only in a round of favourite characters. Rarely as the doors of the temple were open, the denizens of Lowshore were not wont to rush with remarkable unanimity to the shrine. It would have seemed, indeed, as if the drama were a dead

letter in the seaport, the audience which came to be subdued by pity and terror being generally restricted to some two or three dozen seafaring men smelling strongly of fish, a sprinkling of boys, and a dash of brightness and colour in the shape of young women in service, or fishermen's wives and daughters.

But what the drama, whether legitimate or illegitimate, failed to do, the lions succeeded in doing. They drew very fair houses—not the nobility and gentry, as represented by one elderly peer, whose estates bordered Lowshore, but who was rarely known to inhabit his great stone castle, preferring a little box at Richmond, stuffed with rare old silver and costly curios; and the vicar; but the shopkeepers and their young men and maidens; the few visitors and the lodging-house proprietors; all the seafaring men and their families; the maids-of-all-work and fisher-boys; the policeman off duty, and a sprinkling of farmers from inland farms. It was late in October, the very dreariest time of the year, and Herr Prusinowski had come to Lowshore in a speculative humour, just to fill up a blank week in his winter programme.

The house was nearly full the first night, a trifle less well attended the second, and on the third a con-

siderable falling-off was apparent. Still it was a very fair house for Lowshore. There was a cheerful sprinkling in the pit, a very good gallery. The boxes alone had a cavernous and dismal aspect. The box audience—the upper middle-class of Lowshore, tradespeople and lodging-letters—had exhausted itself. Herr Prusinowski had brought a dramatic company of three with him to support the lions, and to eke out the evening's entertainment with a couple of farces or comediettas. This company consisted of a light comedian, a low comedian, and a comedy lady. The light comedian was the aspiring De la Zouche, who had blossomed from a walking gentleman into the popular provincial Charles Mathews—white hat, patent-leather boots, light-green trousers, cane, and rapid utterance. The performances began with *Delicate Ground*, and were to conclude with the *Secret*, a farce of an ancient and respectable character.

The lion-tamer, who was a spoilt child of fortune, had a supreme contempt for bad houses, and with a flagrant injustice was wont to wreak upon the innocent few who did come to see him that wrath inspired by the guilty many who stopped away. That is to say, he punished the scanty but admiring audience by scamping his performance, and depriving them of

their just due. The dramatic company were accustomed to empty benches and a barren dress-circle.

The weather was against Herr Prusinowski on this particular evening. The north winds came howling across the German Ocean as if they were intent upon sweeping Lowshore from the face of the earth, driving a salt-flavoured sleet before them, which well-nigh blinded the adventurous pedestrian. The Herr expressed himself very forcibly about the weather, as he took leave of his family before setting out for the theatre. The comedietta was just over as he went in at the stage-door, and he had to dress in a hurry, struggling into his close-fitting raiment, and girding himself with scarlet and gold, while a feeble little orchestra of four—clarionet, flute, and two fiddles—played some old-fashioned country-dance tunes, what time the audience regaled themselves with prawns and porter. The three lions looked tremendously big on the small stage, awfully real against the background of faded scenery. Robinson was out of sorts. He was sensitive upon the subject of weather, and had an especial aversion to high winds; perhaps some hereditary yearning for Libyan sands or Asia's burning sky—personally he could know nothing about either, having been born in Whitechapel—may have

affected him at such times; at any rate the fact remained, cold or blustering weather disturbed his leonine mind.

The feeble little orchestra made a great struggle to produce a soul-inspiring chord, and came out superbly, the second violin a trifle in the rear. Herr Prusinowski bounded on to the stage from a rocky set piece, and began his work rather languidly, handling Robinson with a certain amount of caution.

He had got through half his performance, and was leading the three lions round the stage on their hind feet, to the stirring music of the march in 'Blue Beard'—stirring even from those poor feeble players—when he heard the opening and shutting of a door at the back of the boxes. He looked up quickly. A gentleman in evening dress was seating himself deliberately in the centre place, a pale-complexioned man, with straight reddish hair. The lion-tamer's heart turned cold. It was the man he had seen at Manchester and Spindlecum, the man whose presence, by some morbid fancy, he associated with the idea of peril to himself. During the last three years he had been always more or less on the look-out for this man, and had never seen him—had begun to congratulate himself upon the probability that he would

finish his public career without ever performing before him again ; and here he was, in this remote seaport town, watching him with the same eager eyes and hungry face, watching as men watched the gladiators in old time, greedy for their blood.

If he could have brought the entertainment to an abrupt conclusion that instant, he would have done so. He would have willingly returned the people their money, and sacrificed the night's profits to escape performing before that man. He was half inclined to plead sudden illness, bring down the curtain with an apology ; but to do that would be to confess himself afraid of that man.

'D—n him !' he muttered to himself, 'he sha'n't see that I'm afraid of him. Faster !' he called out to the orchestra, 'faster and louder !' and as the music quickened, he urged the animals with his whip.

Robinson, *alias* Moloch, resented the impertinence with a suppressed roar, and from that moment Rudolph Prusinowski lost his presence of mind and lost his temper. He was determined to bate not one of his tricks, to demonstrate to that cold-blooded wretch in the boxes that he was not afraid of him. He made the animals do more work than usual, looking defiantly at that watchful face in the boxes all the while. The

little theatre shook with applause, the pit rose to him, as the good old actors were wont to say; the gallery rang with bravoos.

All in a moment, at the last, in the crowning feat which was to conclude the performance, the bravoos changed to an awful shout of horror. No one could say how it happened, the brute's movements were too rapid for human eyes to follow. Herr Prusinski was lying on the stage mawled and torn, the lion crouching upon him.

The keeper and a couple of brawny scene-shifters rushed upon the stage; they dragged him from under the infuriated beast insensible and covered with blood, and carried him off to the dressing-room, where the two rival surgeons of Lowshore came rushing in to him five minutes afterwards. Surgery could do nothing; his ribs were crushed to powder, and there was a perforation of the lung and hæmorrhage. He breathed stertorously for about half an hour, and then died, without one ray of returning consciousness.

'Strange,' the red-haired gentleman used to say afterwards, when he told the story as a pleasant kind of thing after dinner, and in some manner reflecting distinction upon himself; 'the poor devil was the second of his trade I saw killed, and I had come

across him three times at long intervals in the course of my travels in the north. I take a considerable interest in that sort of thing; there's more excitement about it than there is in the drama. Prusinski was a very respectable fellow; had saved money, I believe; and left his wife and children comfortably provided for.'

ON THE BRINK

ON THE BRINK

CHAPTER I.

THERE was a wedding at a dusky old church in one of the humbler quarters of that busy manufacturing town known as Mirkdale—a commonplace wedding enough in its way, but not the less an interesting ceremonial to the little group of men and women who assisted at it, radiant in their best clothes, and with altogether a holiday look about them.

The chief actor in this homely spectacle was the bridegroom—a big, rather clumsy-looking man, with coarse black hair cropped short about his large head, and a swarthy face, made darker by the shaggy black brows that overshadowed his dark-gray eyes. Not a bad-looking fellow by any means, but a man whose countenance one might fancy could assume a somewhat appalling look under the influence of anger or any very strong feeling.

This man was Joshua Rainbow, foreman at the Mirkdale Cartridge Manufactory, eight-and-thirty years of age if a day, and accounting himself one of

the proudest and happiest of mankind in the fact that he had won Esther Wall for his wife.

He had, indeed, a fair justification for his pride. The girl was the prettiest, brightest little creature that ever bewildered and bewitched an honest man's senses—a delicate coquettish little beauty, with a pale fair skin that kindled into transient flashes of colour now and then when she spoke, hazel eyes with a tender light in them, and the veriest rosebud of a mouth. Her nose might not have been the most perfect thing in the way of noses, but it was small and inoffensive; and then there were stray beauties in the way of dimples and eyelashes, and gracious curves about the girlish throat and bust that a sculptor might have raved about.

She was only eighteen, and was being married to Joshua Rainbow, who was just twenty years her senior, and who looked older than he was. But there are marriages of convenience even in this lowly walk of life, and Esther came of a family which was very low down in the world, and to whom an alliance with the steady-going, sober, prosperous foreman of the great cartridge factory seemed a most brilliant opening in life. Joshua's wages were close upon three pounds a week, while the whole of Matthew Wall's

family had to exist upon less than half that sum. So Esther had accepted Mr. Rainbow's offer chiefly to please her father, who was a hard kind of man, and would have taken any opposition to his will in no very pleasant spirit; and a little for the sake of a herd of younger brothers and sisters, all very much in want of any assistance that a wealthy brother-in-law might afford them; and somewhat influenced thereto by the pathetic pleading of her mother, who was rather a faded and washed-out person, with a tendency to look at the darker side of life; which perhaps, as she had seen very little of the brighter side, was not so surprising a condition of mind as it might, on the first showing, have appeared.

It is not to be supposed that Esther Wall was in any way averse from Joshua Rainbow in his character of lover and husband, or that she went to the altar with the feelings of a victim. When people had questioned her about her sentiments on this point, she had answered readily enough that she liked Joshua very well, that he was very good to her, and that father and mother wished them to be married. She had a little half-childish pride in the thought of having a house of her own, and being prosperous and better-dressed than she had been in the days of her

dreary penniless girlhood, and being able to invite her father and mother to dinner on Sundays, and to have her sisters and brothers to tea whenever she liked. Joshua had promised her that there should be no limit on his side to these hospitalities; that she should be her own mistress in everything. The fact is, that this big, swarthy-faced, gunpowder-be-smeared Joshua was ready to kneel down and kiss the ground she walked upon, or to be guilty of any act of homage, however foolish, in testimony of his love. He had rather a clumsy way of expressing his feelings, leaving them indeed, for the most part, altogether unexpressed; but his idolatry was not the less intense, and he believed that in all the world there was not so bright or beautiful a creature as the girl whom this happy day was to make his wife.

The day was not in harmony with his happiness. It was a dark autumnal day, cold and gusty, and the ceaseless rain beat against the dingy windows of the church all through the marriage service; and the curate shivered as he rattled through his office, and the wedding-party looked doubtfully at their Sunday clothes as they came out into the porch after the signing of the register in the chilly little vestry. There had been no rain when they came to the

church, and the whole party had walked there; but Joshua would not hear of their walking home. He sent his best-man to fetch a couple of cabs, and the little party went back into the cold dull church, and waited there in the gloom for the coming of those vehicles. It was rather a dreary conclusion to the ceremony. The poor little bride shivered, and wrapped her shawl closer round her; it was a Paisley shawl, quite a splendid drapery, and a gift from Joshua. Indeed, her wedding outfit, small as it was, had been chiefly contributed by her lover, old Matthew Wall justly declaring that he had no money to waste on finery. Whatever money he had to waste went to the Coach and Horses—a dingy little low-roofed place of entertainment at the end of Cockermouth-gardens, in which choice locality the Wall family had their abode.

Nor did Mr. Wall's means enable him to do honour to his daughter's wedding by any friendly banquet at his own house. 'A cup of tea and a winkle, with a glass of something short arter,' he had growled, was as much as he could do for a friend; so the marriage-feast was held at the abode of Joshua's mother—a stately old dame, supposed to have saved money, who lived in lodgings, which were the very

pink of neatness in a humble way, and which had been shared up to this time by her son.

But now the change in his condition was to separate mother and son. Joshua had pleaded hard that they should all three live together, assuring his mother of his continued duty and obedience, and that she should receive the same from his pretty young wife.

‘No,’ Mrs. Rainbow said, with rather a doleful sigh. ‘You mean well, Joshua, I know, but it can’t be. Marriage for you means separation between you and me. I had got to think that you would never marry, seeing that you had come to nigh forty years of age without so much as thinking about it. And I did fancy, if ever you married, you’d have chosen some one nearer your own age and with a tidy little bit of money. However, of course, it isn’t my place to complain. You’ve chosen for yourself, lad, and ought to know better than any one whether you’ve chosen well. But as to living all together, Josh, that would never do. I couldn’t do with a young girl’s ways. Better take a place of your own, my lad, and leave the poor old woman to end her days alone.’

This was said with an air of melancholy resignation, and nothing Joshua could say would move his

mother from her resolution. So he took a small house of his own, very much to the satisfaction of the Wall family; a decent little detached cottage, with a bit of garden, on the outskirts of the great smoky town, almost in the country, indeed, and with quite a rustic air about it. The furnishing of this new house swallowed up a considerable part of Joshua's savings; but O, what a happy man he was as he haunted the brokers' shops of an evening, with Esther on his arm, choosing chairs and tables, and glass and hardware and crockery, for the house they were to share together! The furniture was quite luxurious and splendid in the eyes of Esther, whose girlhood had been spent amidst the dingiest surroundings.

Joshua bought a little mahogany cheffonier for the parlour that was quite an elegant thing in its way, to say nothing of a tea-caddy, a chintz-covered couch for the mistress of the house, an arm-chair of some stained wood, highly varnished and of rather a sticky surface, for the master. Up-stairs the principal bedchamber was embellished with a paper that was an actual flower-show of roses and lilies, and there were dimity draperies to the windows and bedstead.

The dowager Mrs. Rainbow sniffed with rather a

doubtful air when she was shown these preparations, and remarked that in her time a clean white-washed wall was considered good enough for any decent working-man's bedchamber, and that such fal-lals as curtains and vallances were undreamt of.

‘It isn't for myself, you see, mother,’ Joshua answered, with rather a sheepish grin; ‘but I thought the roses and that like would please Hetty. I wanted to have something bright about her, like herself, you see. What is she but a rose, bless her, and a blooming one?’

‘Humph!’ muttered the old woman; ‘roses are well enough, but I never heard of any use in 'em. If I'd had the choosing of a wife for you, Joshua, I should have looked for something more serviceable and likely to stand wear and tear than roses.’

But however in her inmost soul, and in occasional outward expression of her sentiments, Mrs. Rainbow might disapprove of this alliance, she could not very well refuse that the wedding-feast should be given in her apartments. The banquet was a handsome one: a substantial dinner of ponderous joints, a dish or two of poultry, and a liberal supply of apple-pies, cheesecakes, custards flavoured with rum, after the manner of that Northern district, and other deli-

cies of a like nature, prepared by the hands of the dwager herself.

The company ate and drank themselves into an almost comatose condition, with the exception of one or two more important guests, who felt themselves charged with the duty of speech-making, and of Joshua and his little bride, who only made the faintest show of eating anything. Indeed, that big generous heart of Joshua Rainbow's was too full for the common things of life to-day. It thrilled with a subdued sense of pride and delight in the fair young wife who sat by his side, and blushed and smiled so sweetly when he spoke to her. He made but a poor reply to his comrade's long rambling speech in his honour. The words would not come, somehow; he had a fear that he must break down and burst into tears; and he left off suddenly in the middle of a sentence and dropped back into his chair, lest this humiliation should come upon him. He had only been able to say that he was thankful for their good wishes, and was happier than words could tell. The company, critical in a lazy way, in spite of the apathy attendant on a state of repletion, murmured among themselves that Joshua Rainbow was a poor speaker.

Joshua thought the entertainment would never

come to an end—for there was no travelling-chariot, with four white horses and blue-jacketed postilions, ready to bear off bride and bridegroom with a great dash and clatter, and a hollow pretence of carrying them to the other end of the world, to the railway-station, *en route* for Dover, *en route* for the Continent—and as a mere act of friendliness Mr. Rainbow felt himself compelled to sit out the feast that was given in his honour. When the after-dinner speech-making was over, there came tea, with something substantial in the way of hot buttered cakes, and something relishing in the shape of shrimps and other small shell-fish; and then the jovial party, who, after eating themselves ill at dinner, seemed to eat themselves well again at tea, sat down to a game of speculation, Joshua and Hetty side by side in partnership—they two who had that day taken upon themselves a partnership only to be dissolved by death.

At last, however, the proceedings were fairly finished, the duties of hospitality liberally performed, and Joshua was free to take his wife to her new home. The rain had ceased long ago: it was a clear moonlight night, a little cold, but very calm and bright, when the bride and bridegroom set out upon

their homeward walk. Hetty had cried a little at parting from her mother, and a little more at parting from her sisters; which Joshua had told her was very foolish—was she not to see them when she pleased, and as often as she pleased? She dried her eyes with a gentle submissive air that was very beautiful in her husband's sight, and put her little hand within his arm to walk home to that new house which was to be her own, and the contemplation of which inspired her with quite a pleasant sense of grandeur and importance.

It was a walk of about a mile and a half; a very solitary walk under those serene starlit skies. For a little time they walked on in absolute silence. Esther was too shy to speak unspoken to, and Joshua's heart was almost too full for words.

'You are not sorry, are you, my dear?' he asked at last, in a very low voice.

'Sorry for what, Joshua?'

'For having married me.'

'I should be very ungrateful if I were, Joshua, when you're so good to me, and have promised that I shall see mother and the rest of them whenever I like—very ungrateful indeed.'

'Don't put it that way, Hetty,' he said, with a

tone that sounded like alarm ; ‘ don’t talk about being grateful to me—it wounds me somehow to hear you say that. What have I done for you ? Nothing. What is there that I wouldn’t do for you, and hold it lightly done for your sake, my dear ? But don’t talk about gratitude. I want to be sure of your love, Hetty.’

‘ I’m sure, Joshua,’ she faltered, embarrassed by his earnestness, ‘ I like you very much—better than any one in the world, except mother.’

‘ Won’t you say love, Hetty ? Liking’s a cold word between man and wife.’

‘ Well, love, then,’ she answered rather coquettishly ; for she felt just a little proud of her power over him. ‘ But of course I love you, because you have been so good to me, and have given me such pretty things—not for the sake of the things, you know, Joshua, but for your kindness in giving them—and have thought so much of me, and taken such trouble about me ; and that’s very much the same as being grateful, you see. It’s only calling gratitude by another name.’

To be sure. The words spoken so simply, and with such an air of truth, struck a chill to his heart. If this was love, what a different love from his ! She

loved him because he had been good to her, and thoughtful about her; and he—he loved her for herself only; would have gone on loving her hopelessly had she treated him ever so badly; must have loved her all the same, perhaps, had she been most unworthy of his love. He knew in this moment that there was something blind, foolish, and unreasoning in his love for her; that it was an infatuation which might have led him to ruin had she been other than she was; that if she had been the lowest outcast in Mirkdale streets he would have taken her to his breast, and given her his heart as utterly as he had given it to her now.

He pitied himself a little as he thought of these things, and then sighed, with a sense of resignation that was not without a touch of bitter sadness. He could never hope that she would love him as he loved her—he, twenty years her senior, with no grace of person or charm of manner to endear him to her. He had need be happy in the security that she liked him, as she had said, better than any one—except her mother.

So they walked homewards under the cold autumnal sky, with all the stars shining upon them, to begin their new life.

CHAPTER II.

Two years of Joshua Rainbow's married life had gone by—not unhappily, but not altogether unclouded by small annoyances, saddened too by one heavy trouble. His little wife had done her best, most likely; but her best had not been much in a domestic way. The household education of Cockermouth-gardens had been a slipshod one; indeed, Esther Wall's youth had been spent in an unvarying atmosphere of muddle. Mr. Rainbow's domestic arrangements were not so comfortable as they might have been; his dinner could rarely be relied upon as a certainty; and it seemed as if the butcher who supplied his table had contracted to furnish the toughest meats ever offered for the digestion of mankind. The water with which his tea was made had a knack of not boiling, or of getting itself smoked in the process; even his humble supper of bread-and-cheese was not altogether to be relied on; for his wife was

apt to miscalculate the resources of the bread-pan, so that he found himself breadless at ten o'clock at night. Mr. Rainbow endured all these ills with wonderful good temper; but they generally reached his mother's ears somehow or other; and he had to suffer more from the dowager's lamentations and reproaches—she always reproached him for his marriage with Hetty—than from the small discomforts of his home.

A baby-boy appeared in the little household about a year after Joshua's wedding-day; and his advent brought real happiness to both husband and wife. Esther had never looked so lovely in Joshua's eyes as when she sat opposite to him with her child in her arms. He used to look at her at such times with a fond admiration that was almost worship; and the graceful girlish figure and tender smiling face recalled to him a picture he had seen once of a fair young mother with a holy Infant on her knees.

At four months old the child sickened and died; and it seemed to Esther as if all the light and hope of her life faded out with him. She did not know how she had loved him, and what a change he had made in her life, until he was gone. When she had lost him, her eyes were opened all at once, and she

saw her future life stretching out before her—a blank and dreary prospect leading nowhere.

She was older now than in the days when she had told Joshua that she liked him better than any one in the world except her mother—older and wiser; and she knew that she had never loved him, and had married him only to please her kindred, and because she was too weak and foolish to say no. She knew now that there was a deeper feeling slumbering in her heart than had ever been awakened by Joshua—knew it by her passionate love for her dead baby, which was as far removed from her calm toleration of her husband as the lightning from the glimmer of some feeble oil-lamp.

For the first few months after her baby's death she neglected her household duties altogether, abandoning herself wholly to that passionate hopeless sorrow; throughout which time her husband showed himself tenderly indulgent to her weakness, grieving sincerely himself for the loss of the child, and being moved to tears at any mention of him.

Then all at once there came a change, and Esther grew suddenly industrious, going about her household work with a steady determination to overcome the mysteries of domestic economy. Joshua's dinner

became a thing to be relied upon ; and the butcher improved the quality of his daily supply. He was grateful beyond measure for this improvement in the state of things, and was never tired of praising his wife for her good management. He used to wonder sometimes why she always received his compliments with a sigh ; why the familiar smile of her girlhood never lighted up her pale face nowadays ; but at the thought of her lost baby he ceased to wonder. It would be long, no doubt, before she recovered from that grief. And how good it was of her to stifle her sorrow and devote herself to the household work for his sake !

‘ I make no doubt my wages will be raised next year, my lass,’ he said to her one evening ; ‘ and then you shall have a girl to help you. I won’t have my darling made a slave of, depend upon it.’

‘ There’s not much work, Joshua,’ his wife answered, with that faint shadow of a smile which was sadder than no smile at all. ‘ It does me good to have something to do. I could never sit all day with my hands before me ; it would drive me mad.’

‘ There’s your sisters,’ Joshua said kindly ; ‘ you might have them to cheer you up a bit, and bear you company.’

‘ They’re no company for me. We don’t get on together as we used. No, Joshua ; you’re very kind to speak of it, but I am best alone.’

So she remained alone week after week ; and in spite of her household work, which occupied two or three hours in the morning, her days were long and blank and empty, and she felt that life was a boon for which she had no reason to be thankful ; a burden rather, that was almost too heavy for her to bear.

It seemed that she had lost all in losing her child—all those new and ardent feelings which he had awakened, and which died with his death, leaving such a weary sense of emptiness in her heart. She had never felt this before the baby’s birth, though she had loved Joshua in those days no better than she loved him now. She had been tolerably happy in the novelty of her life, in the sense of being comfortably lodged and well-dressed, and being a help to that poor ragged family in Cockermouth - gardens ; and she had been just a little proud of Joshua’s devotion. But all that was past and gone. The humble comfort of her home gave her no farther satisfaction ; nay, there were times when she would have gladly gone back to the

struggles and muddle of Cockermouth-gardens, where there would be no leisure for thinking.

So the time went on, till she had been married two years ; and the dowager Mrs. Rainbow, bearing down upon her son's wife now and then in a lofty and condescending spirit, was fain to confess that Esther had made some improvement in household management, and that the place looked bright and tidy enough.

‘ Though I must say I think you’re a little too fond of fal-lals, Esther,’ the old lady said. ‘ Those knitted curtains, for instance, I suppose they cost Joshua a matter of six or seven shillings ?’

‘ I knitted them myself, mother. I’ve plenty of time for needlework when I’ve done everything else.’

‘ You might have spent the time better making Joshua a set of shirts. The set I made him before he married must be nigh worn out.’

‘ I am making half-a-dozen, mother,’ Esther answered meekly.

‘ In short, you don’t know what an industrious little wife I’ve got, mother,’ Joshua said in an outburst of pride, and a great hearty laugh, which seemed to shake the little parlour where they sat.

So the first two years of their married life ended,

and the third year began in a quiet peaceful way which promised well for the future. Joshua was quite happy now, believing himself the most fortunate of men, and boasting of himself in that character among his comrades. If he saw a cloud upon his young wife's face now and then, he set it down to one account—she was thinking of her dead child. He grew accustomed to the pensive expression, which made the fair pale face and the soft hazel eyes lovelier than they had ever been, and did not perceive that it was gradually changing to a look of settled melancholy. He was not a man of very quick perception, perhaps ; staunch and true as steel, but a trifle sluggish of brain.

There were not many neighbours within an easy distance of Mr. Rainbow's domicile. Between the cottage and the town there was a broad waste of dreary building-land, which had once been meadow, but was now cut up into plots, and crowned here and there with the blighted skeleton of some unfinished house. The land was all to let, and the skeletons were for sale ; and the estate seemed altogether a disastrous speculation. On the country side of the cottage there was a patch of common which was almost pretty, with pools of black-looking

water here and there, where tadpoles transformed themselves into frogs, according to the scientific creed of the juvenile population, and an occasional cow grazing. Here, in the summer evenings, it was Joshua's habit to walk with his wife. They always walked the same way, and returned at the same hour; and one summer evening was so like the rest, that Esther had hard work to keep count of the days from one Sunday to another. Joshua was a good churchman, and they went to church twice every Sunday, sometimes to that dull old church in which they had been married, and sometimes to a pretty rustic-looking little church in a village called Mapledean, a mile or so in the country.

It was a pleasant walk enough to this place across the common and through some fertile meadows, over which there was a public right of way. There were not many gentlemen's houses at Mapledean; but there was one which they had to pass on their way to the church that Esther admired exceedingly. She felt some special kind of interest in it from the fact that it belonged to Mr. Lyne, the proprietor of the factory where Joshua Rainbow was foreman. But she admired the house still more for its own sake. It was an old red-brick mansion of the Tudor period,

surrounded by a moat with a grassy border, where the water looked always still and clear, like a mirror; and within the moat there were the most fertile and the most perfectly-kept gardens that Esther had ever seen. Such flowers as bloomed in those gardens she fancied could surely grow nowhere else; such a wealth of roses, such glorious masses of geraniums, such a flush of light and colour all the summer long! Esther felt a keener interest in the place, perhaps, on account of its having been unoccupied by any one but servants ever since she had known it. In its perfect silence and repose it might have been the palace of the Sleeping Beauty, except that there was not the faintest trace of neglect or decay upon it.

Joshua told his wife that Mr. Lyne was abroad, and had been abroad for some years,—in Egypt part of the time, he had heard, and in Russia, and all manner of outlandish places; but the house and gardens were always kept in apple-pie order, ready for his coming, as nobody could tell when he might drop down upon them, as Joshua put it.

Esther asked him what kind of person Mr. Lyne was.

‘Well, my dear,’ Joshua answered, in his deli-

berate way, 'you see he was quite a youth when I last set eyes upon him, a year or so before his father's death. He was at Oxford then, carrying on his education, I've heard say. He was very handsome, and very pleasant and free-spoken, I remember, whenever he came to the factory, as he did now and then, to see his father; and pretty generally came after money, I fancy. They say he had a rare talent for spending it, even then. And about a year after that, the old gentleman went off sudden, as you know, in some kind of a fit, and Mr. Stephen came into all the property, being the only child, you see. He was abroad then, ever so far away, and has never been home since; and that's a good four year ago.'

'Is he very rich?' Esther asked wonderingly.

'Isn't he? Rich! yes, Hetty, I should think so. Why, the factory brings in no end of money, and there's landed estates that the old gentleman bought worth ever so many thousands a year.'

Very often after this, when Esther passed the old red-brick house, with its luxuriant rose-garden, where the flowers seemed hushed to sleep in the summer air, she used to think of its absent master, wondering in what far-away world he could be, and whether he ever thought in those strange lands of this rustic

tranquil Mapledean. She might have wondered about this much longer, perhaps, but for an event that occurred one fine Sunday in the third year of her married life.

Joshua and his wife had been to evening service at Mapledean church, and were strolling slowly home in the dewy evening—one of those summer twilights of unspeakable calmness, with a flush of rose-colour in the west, and an opal sky above. They were very silent, perhaps in harmony with the solemn stillness of the evening, perhaps because Joshua's conversational powers were of a limited order, and their subjects for talk very few.

Walking arm-in-arm in this friendly silent manner, a pensive shadow always upon Esther's face, they came to the broad low gates of the old Tudor house. The gates opened upon a curious old stone bridge that spanned the moat; and to-night there was a figure leaning with folded arms upon the ponderous woodwork—the figure of a young man, with a dark handsome face, looking dreamily out at the landscape. Joshua gave a little start at sight of this gentleman, and touched his hat.

The young man called to him eagerly. 'Why, Joshua Rainbow, is that you?' he cried; 'not a day

older than when I saw you last, I declare. You're just the man I want to see, though I didn't think of your turning up hereabouts. You can tell me all the news of the factory.'

'There isn't much to tell, sir. Everything goes well; but of course you'd hear all that from Mr. Crosby regular. It gave me quite a start like, seeing you here like a ghost almost. I didn't know you was in England.'

'Of course not, my good fellow; I only came down here last night. I shall look round at the factory to-morrow, and I must give you all a dinner somewhere next week, in honour of my coming home. Is that pretty girl on your arm a young sister of yours, Joshua, or a niece?'

'She's my wife, sir,' the foreman answered proudly; 'twenty years younger than me; but that don't prevent us being as happy as the days are long,—does it, Hetty, my lass?'

'No, Joshua,' she murmured in a very low voice. Stephen Lyne had looked at her while Joshua was speaking, with a half-wondering, half-compassionate expression in his dark eyes. Very magnificent eyes they were, by the way, and capable of infinite expression.

Joshua did not see that look; but Esther did, and resented it, divining somehow that she was pitied. When they walked homeward presently, Joshua was hearty in his praise of his employer's good looks and genial manners; but his wife said she thought he was proud, in spite of his civility, and that she should never like him.

‘What must we seem but dirt to such as him, Joshua?’ she said almost fretfully,—‘common working people like us.’

Upon which Joshua improved the occasion with some rather hackneyed remarks upon the dignity of an honest man, and an honest man's life of labour, to which Esther did not listen very attentively. She was thinking of the compassionate look in Stephen Lyne's dark eyes; the picturesque pallor of his complexion, bronzed a little by foreign suns; the thin lips, which had a supercilious curve even when he smiled.

Joshua Rainbow saw a good deal of his employer in the following week, at the factory, where he walked from room to room in a kind of state, with Mr. Crosby the manager and a clerk or so in attendance upon his footsteps, like a Prince of Wales. The dinner he had talked about was given at one of the

best taverns in Mirkdale towards the close of the week, and was a sumptuous banquet, which gave the men an exalted idea of Mr. Lyne's liberality.

At Mapledean church next Sunday evening, Esther found herself wondering whether they would see Mr. Lyne again in their homeward walk. The world in which she lived was so narrow, her life so colourless altogether, that it was scarcely strange she should think with some little interest of so important a person as her husband's employer. His wealth, his power, his perfect face, with its half-veiled expression of pride—a languid listless look, that was perhaps rather a scornful indifference for everything in the world than an exalted estimate of himself,—all these attributes placed him so far away from the only people Esther Rainbow knew, and made him as remote and separate from her little world as if he had been a demigod. She did not like him though, she told herself, in spite of her husband's good opinion of him; and the remembrance of that look of his vexed and humiliated her somehow.

Yes, he was at the gate again when they left the church, standing in the same listless attitude, with folded arms upon the topmost bar, as if he had never moved since she saw him last, Esther thought. He

greeted Joshua with great cordiality, and began to talk about the factory and his inspection of last week. Then, seeing Esther's admiring look at the garden, he asked presently whether Mr. and Mrs. Rainbow would not like to step in and take a little walk amongst the roses—an invitation which Joshua felt to be a very great compliment, and accepted with becoming modesty.

Stephen Lyne opened the gate, and they went in among that wealth of flowers. The standard roses grew on either side of a broad grassy walk, where the turf was like velvet-pile; and besides the standards, there were great masses of bush-roses, and tall iron rods on which other roses climbed skyward; and at the end of that broad green walk there was a large marble basin of water, with a dolphin spurting a cloud of spray from his marble jaws, and innumerable gold-fish darting to and fro among the broad leaves of the water-lilies.

To Esther it seemed like walking in Paradise, and the soft hazel eyes grew bright with wondering rapture as she looked about her. Mr. Lyne came round to her side, and watched her with a half smile upon his face, amused by that innocent wondering look, which was so like a child's.

‘It’s a nice old-fashioned place,’ he said in his careless way; ‘and they have kept it very well while I’ve been knocking about the world.’

‘O, it is lovely!’ she murmured. ‘I did not know there was anything so beautiful in the world.’

‘Poor child, how little you can have seen of the world!’ Stephen Lyne said, in a voice so low that only Esther could hear it; and again she saw that pitying look in his face which wounded her somehow.

Joshua was staring about him in a dignified business-like way, admiring the perfect order of everything, and pleased by his employer’s courtesy, but not in any romantic raptures with roses or fountain. Mr. Lyne gathered a handful of roses—a great yellow rose with a faint rich perfume that was almost overpowering, a white moss-rosebud just bursting into flower, and a rose of a deep purplish red that was almost black—and gave the careless nosegay to Esther.

This glimpse of Paradise lasted about a quarter of an hour; and then Mr. Rainbow and his wife withdrew, refusing Mr. Lyne’s invitation to go into the house and take some refreshment. They went very near the old Tudor mansion in their walk through the gardens; and Esther saw one room through a

great bay-window—a room whose walls were lined with books, and where there was a litter of papers and drawing materials on one table, some wine and fruit on another, and a gigantic tawny mastiff lying asleep on a tiger-skin by the window; and she guessed that this was Mr. Lyne's favourite room.

What a miserable little place her own parlour seemed after that brief glimpse of splendour, and how utterly loathsome the square plot of garden, where a few scrubby rose-bushes grew amongst cabbages and onions, with here and there a tuft of hen-and-chicken daisies, and a poor little patch of degenerate heartsease! Esther was curiously fretful and discontented that evening; and poor Joshua, sorely perplexed by the change in her, was fain to think that she was ill. All night long she dreamed of walking amongst roses, with Stephen Lyne by her side, and that pitying look always upon his face. The next day she was herself again, much to Joshua's relief; grave and gentle, busying herself in the morning with her household work, and stitching at Joshua's shirts all the afternoon; but O, how long the day was! while that bright picture of the rose-garden at Mapledean seemed to darken all the rest of the world. She thought of Cockermouth-gardens, where her girlhood

had been spent, and thought how much more Mr. Lyne would pity her if he could see the dinginess of her old home, and what a common creature she must seem in his eyes! She seemed common enough to him as it was, no doubt; and Joshua, with his big feet and clumsy gunpowder-blackened hands!

But he did not suffer her to feel this long.

That day came to an end at last, and another day began—a sunless day, close and sultry, with occasional showers, and distant threatenings of a thunder-storm. It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, and Joshua had eaten his dinner and gone back to the factory ever so long, when Esther, sitting at her work by the parlour window, was startled by an unfamiliar knock at the door.

She ran quickly to open it, and gave a little cry of surprise on seeing her visitor. It was Mr. Lyne. There was a sharp shower rattling down, and he had been caught in it.

“How I have been idling about the common all the morning with a book,” he said, “and the rain took me by surprise. But I happened to remember that Joshua lived hereabouts, and thought I would ask your father shelter. I found your father’s name on the door and he ushered him into the little parlour quite

had been spent, and thought how much more Mr. Lyne would pity her if he could see the dinginess of her old house, and what a common creature she must seem in his eyes! She seemed common enough to him as it was, no doubt; and Joshua, with his big

CHAPTER III.

THAT day came to an end at last, and another day began—a sunless day, close and sultry, with occasional showers, and distant threatenings of a thunderstorm. It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, and Joshua had eaten his dinner and gone back to the factory ever so long, when Esther, sitting at her work by the parlour window, was startled by an unfamiliar knock at the door.

She ran quickly to open it, and gave a little cry of surprise on seeing her visitor. It was Mr. Lyne. There was a sharp shower rattling down, and he had been caught in it.

‘I have been idling about the common all the morning with a book,’ he said, ‘and the rain took me by surprise. But I happened to remember that Joshua lived hereabouts, and thought I would ask you for shelter.’

Esther ushered him into the little parlour, quite

speechless with surprise, and very shy in his presence. Again she felt that sense of humiliation with which he seemed always to inspire her, thinking how the commonness of the room would strike him, and watching his dark eyes as they shot one swift glance round it.

But he did not suffer her to feel this long. He talked so pleasantly, that he won her thoughts away from herself, telling her a great deal of his adventures abroad and the lonely life he had led in strange wild places; frightening her a little by the relation of his perils and hair-breadth escapes by sea and land, and then beguiling her into smiles again by some anecdote with the dash of the comic.

'You will never go back there any more, will you, Mr. Lyne?' she asked, with the prettiest air of anxiety.

His dark face flushed with a pleased look at this question.

'Well, yes, I think I am very likely to go back. I have so little to care for in England, you see, so little to interest me. What is there in Mirkdale for a man who knows nothing about commerce, or at Mapledean for a man who doesn't care about agriculture? Abroad there is always adventure. I think

I shall go to Africa, and push my way as far as I can.'

He smiled to himself, as it were, with a strangely subtle smile, as he saw Esther's anxious look.

'Poor little soul,' he thought, 'has it come to this already?'

The rain lasted a long time; or perhaps there were several showers, with only brief intervals between them. At any rate, it did not seem to have left off raining very long when Stephen Lyne went away. He held out his hand at parting, and Esther gave him hers, blushing and wondering that he should stoop to shake hands with his foreman's wife.

He looked down smiling at the little hand, rather the worse for household work, but as small as a lady's, and in the next moment he was gone.

The little Dutch clock in the kitchen struck six as Esther shut the door. Six o'clock! Mr. Lyne had been with her more than three hours, and yet the time had seemed nothing, even to her, for whom time was wont to be so long.

Joshua came home to his tea presently, and his wife told him who had taken shelter there, but not how long he had stayed. The foreman did not seem gratified by this news, but made no remark.

Stephen Lyne came again before that week was over. He had been idling away his morning on the common again, he said. He rather liked the common, though it was dull and flat enough ; but a nice, lazy, quiet place for an idle fellow to lounge away his time. He came to the cottage for some water for his dog, the great tawny mastiff. There was water enough in the pools on the common, of course ; but it was brackish, Mr. Lyne told Esther, and he did not care to let the brute drink it.

‘ You won’t mind him, will you, Mrs. Rainbow ? ’ he asked, holding the animal by the collar. ‘ He’s as gentle as a lamb among friends, though he would strangle any number of ruffians if he saw me in danger.’

She was a little afraid of the great creature at first, and looked very pretty with her colour coming and going, and her parted lips trembling ever so slightly. Perhaps she was more startled by this second visit of Mr. Lyne’s than by the presence of the dog. She brought him a bowl of water, from which he lapped a little with no great appearance of thirst, and then, at a word from his master, stretched himself at full length. Mr. Lyne stayed nearly as long as upon the last occasion, though there was no

rain to hinder his departure this time ; and again the time seemed very short to Esther as she stitched at her husband's shirts, and listened to that pleasant talk about that vast world whereof she knew so little. She felt herself more than ever ignorant and common in his presence, but he seemed to have no sense of her commonness. If she had been the greatest lady in the land, he could not have been more deferential in his tone. O, if she could only have seen his half-tender, half-contemptuous smile as he walked back to Mapledean, thinking, 'Poor little soul, has it gone so far already ?'

'O, by the way, Mrs. Rainbow,' he said, as he was going away, 'you needn't tell Joshua that I've been wasting your afternoon with my idle talk. I don't want him to know what a lazy fellow I am, and how glad of a little pleasant relief to my empty days. It would tell against me at the factory, you see.'

Esther did not see clearly why Mr. Lyne need care what her husband thought about his manner of spending his days ; but she obeyed him nevertheless, and was not sorry to obey him. She did not want to see that troubled look in Joshua's face again.

After this Mr. Lyne came often, very often ; at first provided with some puerile excuse for each visit,

but by and by without any excuse at all. There is no need to track the seducer's progress step by step. From that first Sunday evening, when he was startled into sudden enthusiasm by Esther's girlish beauty, he had set himself deliberately to accomplish this deadly work. What right had a clodhopper like Joshua Rainbow to such a wife as this? He was not a common libertine, this Stephen Lyne, nor had his youth been stained by vulgar profligacy; but his fancy being once engaged, he thought no more of the price which others might have to pay for his sin or his folly than if these victims of his pleasure had been the lowest creatures of the insect world, crushed out of being by his passing footstep. He had a refined taste, and was not easily fascinated. Many a pretty woman in those foreign capitals, where Stephen Lyne had drained the goblet of polite pleasure, had tried to win this golden prize in the matrimonial market; but Stephen had shown himself indifferent, and had wandered on fancy free. Never in his life had he seen a face that impressed him like this pale fair face of Esther's; never had his heart thrilled with such passion as that which stirred it now, when he thought of Esther. She must be his, at any cost of sin and suffering. Upon that common clod her

husband, Stephen Lyne wasted no thought. And for the girl herself, could he doubt his power to win her? Could he question the result of his wooing when the time came for him to speak? He counted her won from the moment in which he saw her face shadowed by that anxious fearful look, when he talked of going back to the scene of his old dangers.

He meant to be cautious, however, and to risk nothing by precipitation; and to this end he made many visits to the little cottage, and sat many hours in Esther's quiet parlour, without any change in his deferential manner, without uttering a word that could betray the state of his feelings, or alarm Joshua Rainbow's wife. But he knew that he was winning a stronger hold on that untried heart day by day. He could read a hundred signs and tokens of her love, so unconsciously expressed; and he never left her without a sense of triumph in the knowledge of his power.

'I have but to lift my finger and she will come,' he said to himself.

And so the time went on. It was towards the close of August, sultry oppressive weather, and Stephen Lyne was seized with an impatient desire to make an end of his work, and carry off his prize.

He had little doubt that it could be easily done. It was only a question of his own pleasure and convenience when the crisis should come.

He made out his plan in his own mind, and contrived a scheme for getting Joshua out of the way. There was some money to be collected at Durnside, a large town forty miles from Mirkdale, and Mr. Lyne told Crosby the manager to send Joshua Rainbow for it, instead of the ordinary collector. Mr. Crosby looked at his chief rather curiously when he received this order, and Stephen Lyne returned the curious look with a haughty stare.

‘Have you any reason for sending Rainbow?’ the manager asked. ‘It’s out of our ordinary way, you know.’

‘Of course I have a reason; but I don’t care to enter into a discussion of my reasons for any order I may choose to give. So you’ll be so good as to see that my wishes are attended to, Mr. Crosby, without giving yourself any farther trouble about the matter.’

The manager bowed, and Joshua Rainbow was told in due time what he had to do. The journey to and fro, and the business to be done at Durnside, would necessarily occupy a couple of days. This was the first time Joshua had ever had occasion to leave his

wife, and the thought of her being alone and unprotected even for one night distressed him. And then it struck him that Esther need not spend the night of his absence in that solitary cottage on the edge of the common. She might sleep at his mother's that night.

He went to the dowager's lodgings to give her notice of this visit, but Mrs. Rainbow the elder was out; so Joshua left a little dutiful note, telling her that he was to leave Mirkdale next morning, and that Esther would spend the following evening and night with her. After this he went home in an easier state of mind, and told his wife of his intended journey. She was quite willing to go to his mother's as he had arranged, little sympathy as there was between her and that stern matron.

If Joshua Rainbow could have known how far away his wife's mind was when she kissed him and wished him good-bye that sultry August morning at the little garden-gate, his heart would have surely broken. But he had not the faintest suspicion of the gulf between them. They had been very happy together, and he had told himself long ago that his young wife had grown to love him, middle-aged fogey as he was.

He went away, smiling back at her and waving his hand to the last,—went away, leaving her to her long lonely day, brightened, as every day now was, by the hope of Stephen Lyne's coming. Yes, she loved him. She had never confessed as much to herself—had, indeed, shut her eyes resolutely against the truth; telling herself, whenever she did try to stifle the weak voice of her conscience, that she only liked to see him because he was a brilliant and clever gentleman, and amused her with his varied talk of books that she had never read, and people and places she had never seen.

Would he come that afternoon? It was her first thought every day. She went about her household work in a feverish hurry always now, lest he should come before the place was neat, and her hair and dress arranged for the afternoon. She made little feeble attempts to ornament the parlour,—a rose or two from the scrubby bushes in a glass of water on the chimney-piece, a spotless starched antimacassar of her own workmanship spread on the chintz-covered sofa,—she was so utterly ashamed of the cottage and its commonness when Stephen Lyne came into it, though it had once seemed to her the perfection of neatness and comfort.

Did she ever think of her dead baby in these days? Alas, no! A stronger passion than even love for that lost little one had taken possession of her, and she had no room for any other thought.

Stephen Lyne came earlier than usual on the day when Joshua started on his journey to Durnside. He had got into a way of opening the door now without knocking. And he came upon Esther suddenly, as she sat at her work, unawares, though she was thinking only of him.

She looked up at him with that transient vivid blush which always made her so beautiful.

‘I want you to come for a walk, Esther,’ he said,—he had taken to calling her Esther lately, but with no lessening of his respect,—‘the house is insupportable upon such a day as this. Throw down that odious calico, at which those poor little fingers are always slaving, and come for an idle stroll across the common.’

‘I don’t like,’ she said hesitatingly; ‘it seems so strange for you and me to walk together.’

‘Not stranger than for us to sit together in this little room. That’s strange enough, if you only knew it, Esther—strange for such a restless spirit as mine to be bound to any place for two or three hours toge-

ther. Come for a walk, Esther. I have a great deal to say to you, and I fancy I could say it best in the open air.'

She rose to obey him, reluctantly, but quite unable to oppose his gracious bidding. She put on a little straw-hat, and went out with him across the common. Not a breath of air stirred the water in the black pools; and Pluto, the mastiff, panted as he trotted by his master's side.

They strolled slowly on, leaving the tranquil common behind them, and passing through the meadows that lay between them and Mapledean. Whatever important communication Mr. Lyne might have to make to his companion, his talk as yet was only of indifferent subjects, — a very fitful kind of talk, lapsing every now and then into silence.

They went on thus till they came to the gate where Esther had first seen Stephen Lyne, that quiet Sunday evening a little more than two months ago. Two months! and it seemed to her a lifetime.

'Come in, Esther,' the young man said, in that low languid tone which was not the less a command, — 'come in and look at the roses once more. Do

you remember that Sunday evening, child—the second time I saw you?’

Did she remember it?—the beginning of her new life, the opening of that strange wild dream which must end soon. Yes; it had come upon her this afternoon that she had been dreaming, and it was time for her to awaken.

Her heart was beating violently. Yes; she knew now that she loved him—that she was guilty of a deadly sin against her husband, had suffered herself blindly to fall into the snare, and was in a measure lost.

‘If he knew,’ she thought to herself,—‘if Joshua could know how false my heart has been to him, surely he would cast me off—surely he would refuse ever to look upon my face again!’

They went slowly along the grassy walk where the late roses were blooming, whose fallen petals strewn the turf like summer snow. They could hear the tinkling of the water-drops from the little fountain in the summer stillness. They were both silent: Esther troubled by the thought of her own wickedness, and yet loving this man who walked beside her with all the passion of her heart; Stephen thoughtful too, but not in an unpleasant mood,—very confident

of the future ; only waiting for the moment in which he should speak the words that must needs be spoken by him to-day.

The moment came at last. He had taken Esther through the open window into the library—the room which she had looked at in wondering admiration that Sunday night. As she was standing by his side, looking down at a heap of sketches on the table, he put his arm gently round her, and drew her to his breast.

‘My darling!’ he said, ‘I am going to leave England to-night.’

She released herself from his encircling arm with a little cry—not of indignation, but of anguish.

‘Going away!’ she exclaimed piteously. ‘For ever?’

‘Who can tell?’ he asked carelessly. ‘Yes, Esther, I am going away. In spite of all the happy hours we have spent together, I am going away. I brought you here—to this empty old house—that I might tell you this quietly. I am going. Speak to me, my love, and say whether I am to go alone.’

She shook her head hopelessly, looking at him with fixed tearless eyes that went to his heart—such heart as he had—and seemed to wound him palpably.

‘I don’t understand you,’ she faltered.

‘My darling, you love me,’ answered Stephen Lyne, ‘and love is better than understanding. You love me, Esther; I have read the truth so many times in those sweet eyes. I am not a man to speak like this if I were not certain. My life, I swore to win you the first hour I saw your face. I have lived only for that one purpose since that time. My plans are all made. Your boor of a husband is out of the way to-night.’

‘O, no, no!’ she cried, with an agonised look, ‘don’t speak of him like that—so good, so true!’

‘Good enough and true enough in his way, I daresay; but I can’t forgive him for having stolen such a treasure. Why, by heaven, the man could have looked for nothing brighter or lovelier had he been a prince of the blood royal. My Esther, my precious one, you will go with me, will you not?’

‘Go with you?’

‘Yes, sweetest, to the end of the world—to one of those golden lands you have loved so much to hear me talk about—from place to place, from one earthly paradise to another, wherever the world is loveliest, and where you shall fancy yourself a princess, and be taken for a princess. Esther, is it yes or no?’

‘If I say no,’ she said, ‘you will go away all the same, and I shall never see you any more?’

‘Why, yes, child, that will be best for both of us. You must be all the world or nothing to me, Esther, from to-day.’

‘Nothing! O my God, I could not bear that!’ she cried passionately, with clasped hands.

He caught her in his arms once more, and kissed her on the lips. She felt as if truth and honour fled away from her for ever in that one fatal kiss.

‘That means yes,’ he said triumphantly. ‘My darling, there is nothing but happiness before us!’

‘Happiness!’ Esther echoed, with a sob; ‘I am the most wicked woman that ever lived; but I cannot part from you.’

‘My dearest, I never thought you could. I have read your heart from the first, little one. And now listen to me, darling, for we have no time to lose. The night-mail leaves at 10.30. It will take us to London in ample time for the morning mail to Dover; and we are not likely to be observed by that train. Meet me at the factory at a quarter before ten. There will be only the night-watchman there at that time, and I’ll take care to get him out of the way before you come. You’ll find me in the little counting-

house on the first-floor, at the top of the stairs. You know the place, I suppose ?

‘ Yes, I have been over it with Joshua.’

She shuddered as she pronounced that name. Her lover was just a little disconcerted by her white still face as she stood before him, with clasped hands and fixed despairing eyes. It was only natural, perhaps, that she should feel the unpleasant aspect of her position. There are prejudices about these things.

‘ So be it then, sweet one. I think the factory will be the wisest place—dark and quiet, and out of the way, and yet within a stone’s throw of the station. We can get out by the little gate opening from the yard into Church-lane ; so if any one should happen to see either of us go in, they’re not likely to see us go out. Bring nothing with you, darling. We shall be in Paris to-morrow evening, and you can get everything there—an outfit worthy of my pretty one. You understand, Esther ?’

‘ Yes.’

‘ At a quarter before ten.’

She bent her head silently.

Her deadly pallor frightened him, and he thought she was going to faint. There was an antique chest

upon one of the tables ribbed with brass, a chest of glittering liqueur bottles and glasses heavily embossed with gold. Mr. Lyne filled one of the little glasses, and forced the contents between Esther's pale lips. It was a sickly sticky compound, but had a dash of fiery spirit in it that brought a faint colour back to her face.

'Come, darling,' Stephen said gently; and they went back to the gardens, with the mastiff at their heels.

'Faithful old Pluto,' muttered Mr. Lyne, as the dog's big jaws were thrust affectionately into his hand, 'I suppose I must take you with me to-night, old fellow.'

To Esther that walk back to the cottage was like a dream. The sultry oppressive atmosphere, the level stretch of common, with patches of dark water, and cattle grazing here and there, like a Dutch picture, seemed all a part of some shapeless horror in her own mind. And yet she went on, and had no thought of turning back, and refusing to tread the dark road which had newly opened to her. Weakly, blindly, helplessly, she gave her life into this man's hands.

'Never to see him again, if I do not go with him

to-night,' she repeated to herself, not once, but many times, when Stephen Lyne had left her alone in the poor little cottage, which seemed so despicable and dreary in its commonness, after the Malpledean library, with its carved-oak book-cases, rare cabinet pictures here and there, its scattered treasures of Venetian glass, and glow of light and colour upon everything.

All through the still summer twilight Esther Rainbow sat in utter idleness; not thinking—indeed her brain seemed to have lost all power of thought—but wondering feebly at her own guiltiness, with no heed for the future, except for that one thought—she would be with him—with no frivolous vain dream of her altered life, and the pleasures and luxuries that her rich lover would give her. Weak and wicked as she was, and much as she admired Stephen Lyne's surroundings, she was at least superior to any consideration of these things. If he had been the poorest workman in the factory, and had besought her to share a life of destitution with him, she must have obeyed him all the same.

As she sat in the summer twilight, with the evening shadows closing round her, there was no picture of the future in her mind: it was a blank, or worse

than a blank—utter darkness—out of which arose one figure with a lurid light round its ghastly face—the face of her husband, looking at her in scornful abhorrence, as the vilest thing on earth. Did she think of her dead child in all those silent hours? Yes, once; and then she fell suddenly upon her knees, and cried aloud,

‘O God, I shall never go to heaven, where he is! I shall never see my baby any more!’

And yet there was no thought of turning back in her mind. If Stephen Lyne had been an enchanter, holding her soul by some mystic spell, his dominion over her could not have been stronger than it was.

At half-past eight o’clock she left the house, going out very softly, as if even in that empty place her guilty footfall might be heard.

She had forgotten all about her engagement to spend the evening and sleep with her mother-in-law, and had no thought of the surprise that might have been excited in the dowager’s well-regulated mind by her non-appearance.

It was dark when she left the cottage, and there were no stars that night, nor the faintest glimmer from the moon, which did not rise until much later. Esther walked to the town with feverish haste, and

the church-clocks were chiming the first quarter after nine when she came into the straggling lamplit road, where the country lost itself in the town. She turned aside into a dark lane, and walked there till the second quarter had chimed from the neighbouring church-tower, and then made her way to the factory by obscure alleys and narrow streets, which had been familiar to her in her dreary girlhood.

And where was Joshua Rainbow while his young wife was hurrying to destruction? At Durnside, too far for succour, and untroubled by any doubt of her safety? No, Joshua was not at Durnside. The business, which might very well have taken him two days, had been hurried over in one: thanks to a series of fortunate accidents, such as finding the people he wanted at home, and ready for him, and so on, the money had been collected before nightfall, and Joshua found himself free to return by an express which left Durnside at a quarter past seven, and did the forty miles in a little more than an hour. It was an expensive train, and Joshua had been told to travel by a cheap and slow one; but he could afford to pay the difference out of his own pocket, and he had a strange feeling of eagerness to return to his

wife, in spite of the arrangements he had made for her safety.

There had been a sense of trouble upon him throughout the time of his absence, vague enough at its worst, but not to be shaken off. What was that expression in the face of Mr. Crosby, the manager, as he gave him his directions for the journey—a look that had puzzled Joshua somehow, and set him wondering in an uneasy way? It haunted him all through his day's work; and as the day waned, his desire to get home again grew into a burning fever.

Why had he been sent on this business? It was a mark of confidence, no doubt, to intrust him with this collection of money; but it seemed altogether motiveless, and the thought of it worried him now that he was far away from Mirkdale. Urged by this shapeless dread, and favoured by circumstance, he got through his work with wonderful rapidity; not wasting an hour upon his dinner, as another man would have done, but refreshing himself only with a glass of ale and a biscuit; and thus it was that at half-past nine he was standing at the door of his mother's lodgings, with all his shadowy fears vanished out of his mind, and happy in the thought of giving his wife a pleasant surprise by this unexpected

return. Hurried as he had been at Durnside, he had found time to buy a bonnet-ribbon and a little work-box for Esther.

The door of Mrs. Rainbow's sitting-room stood ajar this sultry evening. Joshua wondered at not hearing his wife's voice within; but then Esther had not been much of a talker of late, and his mother had fallen asleep perhaps, leaving his darling to amuse herself as best she might. He had looked up from the street, but had caught no glimpse of her at the window. Yet this was not strange, for Mrs. Rainbow cultivated quite a garden of geraniums and balsams on a little table in front of the casement.

There was no light in the room, late as it was. Joshua went in softly, expecting to find his mother slumbering peacefully in her easy-chair. But she was not asleep. She was standing by the window, looking down across the geraniums into the dull dark street—a tall solemn-looking figure in a scanty black gown.

‘Where’s Esther?’ Joshua asked breathlessly.

‘She has not come here.’

‘Not come?’

‘No, Joshua. Did you expect that she would?’

‘Expect that she would! why, of course, mother.’

I arranged it all with her. She was to be with you at five, and to spend the night here—as I said in that scrawl I left for you yesterday.’

‘I did not expect her, Joshua,’ his mother said in her cold hard voice. ‘Esther had something better to do when you were out of the way than to come to an old woman like me. This is a very poor place for Esther Rainbow, with her hopes and expectations.’

‘In God’s name, what do you mean, mother?’

‘What do I mean? What does everybody in Mirkdale mean when they speak of your wife? Do you think that if you choose to shut *your* eyes, other people will shut theirs to oblige you?’

‘Mother, what are you talking about?’

‘About your wife, Joshua, who has brought shame upon us all.’

‘Are you mad?’ he gasped; ‘or am I?’

‘What, you’ve heard nothing of the neighbours’ talk, then? You don’t know how Stephen Lyne has been hanging about your place—two and three hours at a time—alone with Esther?’

‘It’s a lie!’ Joshua cried fiercely. ‘He has never darkened my door but once—nigh two months ago—when he took shelter from the rain.’

‘He has been in your house two or three times a week—four times a week often. I daresay my lady fancied, in such a lonesome place there was no one to take heed of her goings-on; but there were neighbours coming and going to see what happened, to take notice when Mr. Lyne went in and when he went out.’

‘How long is it since you heard this, mother? Mind, it’s a lie, a wicked lie; and I’ll prove it so. But how long have you heard it, and kept it from me?’

‘I only heard it a few days ago; and I was coming to you to tell you of it in a day or so.’

‘You don’t believe it, mother?’

‘I can’t help believing it; those I heard it from ain’t likely to speak anything but truth to me. And there’s nothing so strange in it. You could hardly expect much else, when you married a girl young enough to be your daughter, for the sake of her pretty face.’

‘I’ll not believe it! I’ll not believe it!’ said Joshua, in a thick hoarse voice. ‘But why isn’t she here?’ he cried, looking suddenly round. ‘If she’s true to me, why isn’t she here?’

‘Ah, why, indeed!’ muttered the old woman, bending over the table to strike a lucifer-match.

The ghastly face which the lighted candle showed her presently almost frightened her. She had never liked her daughter-in-law, had been jealous of her from the very first, and perhaps would have been scarcely sorry for her disgrace; but she was sorry for that look of agony in her son's white face.

‘Where are you going, Joshua?’ she cried, as he dashed out of the room.

‘To look for her,’ he answered, without stopping.

He ran down-stairs and out into the street. The hot still night seemed to suffocate him. He ran on through a street or two, startling the few people that he met by his wild haggard look, and presently running against one of his fellow-workmen.

‘Why, Joshua Rainbow, what’s the matter wi’ you to - night?’ cried the man. ‘Where are you going, lad?’

‘Home. There, Phil, don’t stop me; I’m in a hurry.’

‘But this is not your way home, lad. Are you gone clean daft? If you’re looking for your wife, I reckon she’s looking for you, poor little lass. I saw her go into the factory just now, as pale as a ghost.’

‘Into the factory — Esther — at this time of night?’

‘Strange, isn’t it? I thought maybe you reckoned upon coming home to-night, and had told her to meet you there. I saw a light burning in the counting-house. I suppose Mr. Crosby’s there still, hard at it.’

‘Let me go, Phil!’ said Joshua desperately, and left his comrade staring after him at the street-corner.

He hurried on to the factory, with his blood in a fever, his heart beating as it had never beaten in his life before. What he expected to find he knew not; but direful and murderous thoughts were in his mind. His wife at the factory at this hour! a light burning in the little counting-house! She had gone to meet some one; and that half-contemptuous, half-pitying look of the manager’s—Joshua knew now what it meant—knew that they had sent him upon this journey to get him out of the way; and his wife knew it too perhaps, and had laughed at him for the besotted dupe he was.

Yes; there was a light burning in the little counting-house. The door below was unlocked. Joshua opened it noiselessly, and went into the passage, where the gas was burning dimly, and up-stairs to the room in which he had seen the lamp.

The door was half open, and he heard a voice within speaking in low soothing tones—*his* voice, Stephen Lyne's. Another moment, and Joshua Rainbow stood in the open doorway, face to face with his wife and her lover.

At sight of that ghastly face Esther gave an awful cry, and fell in a heap upon the ground. Stephen Lyne lifted her up, and pushed her hurriedly into a little room—a kind of dressing-room—that opened out of the counting-house. Then planting his back against the door, he faced the man he had wronged, with an insolent defiance in his dark eyes.

'Now, sir,' he said, 'what do you want here?'

'Your life, you infernal scoundrel, though every drop of your heart's blood isn't enough to pay for the wrong you've done me! But let me get my wife out of this place first, and then you'll see what I want of you. Let me pass to that room.'

Stephen Lyne kept his place against the door.

'*Your* wife!' he cried contemptuously. 'What right has a boor like you to such a little beauty? She is my mistress, fellow; and you can look for your remedy in a court of law. I can afford to pay a handsome price for my bird.'

He had his back still against the door, when

Joshua Rainbow seized him by the throat and flung him away from it. Then the two men closed upon each other like a couple of gladiators. There was a sharp rapid struggle, a push for the outer door of the counting-house, then the fall of a heavy body down the stairs, and in the next moment Joshua Rainbow staggered back into the room, with the mastiff Pluto hanging on to his neckerchief. The dog had been prowling somewhere about the empty rooms and passages, and had only come upon the scene in time to see his master hurled down the short flight of stairs.

Esther stood in the doorway between the two rooms, in an agony of terror, watching her husband's struggle with the mastiff. She called to the dog by his name; she tried to grasp his collar, and failing in this, flew to the window, screaming for help.

A couple of men came running in—the night-watchman and another. At the foot of the stairs they almost stumbled over Mr. Lyne, prostrate and helpless.

‘What’s this?’ they cried as they raised him, without recognising him in the dim light.

‘Nothing—a dislocated shoulder, perhaps—nothing more,’ the young man answered, with a groan;

‘but there’s a man up-stairs being murdered by a dog. You’d better see to him.’

Esther’s screams were still sounding above. The two men rushed up-stairs. Joshua Rainbow was lying on the ground unconscious, fearfully mangled about the head and face, the mastiff standing a few paces from him licking his bloody jaws.

They raised him up between them, for the moment thinking him dead.

‘Eh, but it’s a bad job, missis,’ said one of them. ‘Who set the dog on to him?’

‘No one. It was my fault—mine,’ Esther gasped. ‘But he’s not dead; O, for the love of heaven, tell me he’s not dead!’

‘Looks rather like it, my lass; but maybe he’ll come round. He’s had an ugly bout of it. Where shall we take him, lass?’

‘Home—O, to his home, if you please! It’s a long way, but we must manage it somehow.’

‘It would be a’most better to take him to the infirmary,’ said the watchman.—‘Here, you Bill, run for a doctor.’

The man hurried off upon this errand. The mastiff, which had lapsed into a state of sullen quiet, walked slowly off, no one hindering his progress.

The watchman had placed Joshua on a chair, and stood by the side of it supporting the lifeless figure, with the helpless head lying on his shoulder. Esther flung herself on her knees, and took her husband's hand in both her own.

‘For me!’ she murmured to herself; ‘for me!’

The messenger came back very quickly with a surgeon who lived close at hand. This gentleman pronounced the case a very serious one, and insisted upon Joshua's being taken to the infirmary. As to taking him home, it was out of the question, he said: he might die on the way; nor could he possibly have the attention he required in his own home. So a stretcher was fetched from the infirmary, and Joshua was carried away upon it, Esther following him, pale and tearless.

For three long weeks Joshua Rainbow lay at the point of death, recognising no one, not even his wretched wife, who used to sit by his bed hour after hour, watching his disfigured face and listening to his wild talk, with a patience that won her the praises of the hospital officials. His mother used to come too; but his mother would never speak to Esther, except to ask her indignantly how she dared to show her face there.

Esther was not to be driven away, however. She had come to live with her father and mother in Cockermouth-gardens, on purpose to be near her husband,—perhaps for another reason also, that she might be secure from the pursuit of Stephen Lyne.

And did Mr. Lyne suffer his prize to escape him without a struggle? Not quite. He was laid-up for a fortnight with his dislocated shoulder, the only harm that had come to him from that rough tumble down a flight of stairs; but as soon as he was at liberty again he threw himself in Esther's way, contriving to meet her one evening as she came home from the infirmary, and asked her once more to fly with him. They would manage things better this time, he said; there should be no hindrance to their flight.

She told him that she had loved him; that any knowledge she had of the meaning of that word must begin and end with her knowledge of him; but that no power on earth could tempt her again to be the guilty creature she had been when she promised to leave her husband for his sake. She had stood upon the brink of a hideous precipice, she said, and had been snatched from ruin by that strong faithful hand.

‘Do you know that I had a child who died, Mr. Lyne,’ she said, ‘and that I was going to give up my child in heaven for you?’

He was very angry with her—bitterly disappointed—for he had loved her as much as it was in him to love any one. When he found that there was no chance of moving her from her resolve, he went away from Mapledean and Mirkdale, and was heard of that autumn at Homburg, playing desperately, and flirting desperately with Parisian damsels of doubtful repute. But there was not one of them as lovely as hazel-eyed Esther Rainbow, and their splendid toilettes lacked the charm that had made her cotton-gown beautiful in his eyes.

O, what a happy tranquil day it was, late in the autumn, when Joshua went home to the little cottage, his face still scarred and seamed, but perfect peace in his heart! His wife had told him everything—how weakly she had yielded to temptation, how close upon the confines of guilt she had been, and how she thanked and honoured him for his rescue of her.

‘It’s not me you’ve got to thank, my lass,’ he answered humbly, ‘but Providence. I was mad that night, and I thought more of killing him than of saving you.’

When Joshua Rainbow was strong enough to begin work again, they left the neighbourhood of Mirkdale, and went away to a great city farther north, where there was another cartridge-factory, and where Esther's husband speedily won for himself a still better position than that which he had held in Stephen Lyne's employ. And a year or two afterwards there came another baby-boy to Esther, fair as her lost angel, bringing with him sweet domestic peace, and a tranquil happiness that was better than any fever-dream of love.

THE END.

GEORGE ELIOT:

MIDDLEMARCH. 8 vols.

consisting of:

- Miss Brooke. (1.)
 Old and young. (2.)
 Waiting for Death. (4.)
 Three love problems. (21.)
 The Dead hand. (37.)
 The widow and the wife. (40.)
 The two temptations. (52.)
 Sunset and sunrise. (61.)

Jubal and other poems. 1 vol.
 (99.)

LE FANU:

The room in the Dragon volant.
 1 vol. (27.)

FARJEON:

London's heart. 2 vols. (84/85.)

FIRST in the field. By the author
 of "Recommended to Mercy".
 2 vols. (90/91.)

FRASER-TYTLER:

Margaret. 1 vol. (67.)

FREYTAG:

Ingo and Ingraban. 2 vols. (75/76.)

GRANT:

Coming home to roost. 2 vols.
 (68/69.)

HAWTHORNE,

Author of "the Scarlet Letter":

Septimius. 1 vol. (30)

HENRY KINGSLEY:

- Old Margaret. 1 vol. (5.)
 The Harveys. 1 vol. (20.)
 Hornby mills and other stories.
 2 vols. (88/89.)

LEE:

Country stories old and new.
 2 vols. (25/26.)

LOCKHART:

Fair to see. 2 vols. (62/63.)

FLOR. MARRYAT:

- The girls of Feversham. 2 vols.
 (94/95.)
 Open Sesame. 2 vols. (100/101.)

MELVILLE:

Satanella. 1 vol. (3.)

OLIPHANT:

- The laird of Norlaw. 2 vols.
 (14/15.)
 Adam Graeme of Mossgray. 2 vols.
 (31/32.)
 At his gates. 2 vols. (44/45.)

OUIDA:

A leaf in the storm and other
 stories. 1 vol. (10.)

PALGRAVE:

Hermann Agha. 2 vols. (50/51.)

MEHEMET PASHA:

Thirty years in the harem. 2 vols.
(46/47.)

PARR:

How it all happened. 2 vols.
(22/23.)

RIDDELL:

Home, sweet home. 2 vols. (86/87.)

ROBINSON:

A bridge of glass. 2 vols. (33/34.)

SHAND:

Shooting the rapids. 2 vols.
(59/60.)

SIX months hence. By the author
of "Behind the Veil". 2 vols.
(73/74.)

SILVERLAND. By the author
of "Guy Livingstone". 1 vol.
(83.)

STANLEY:

How I found Livingstone. 3 vols.
(54/56.)

STRAUSS:

The old faith and the new. 2 vols.
(77/78.)

STRETTON:

The Doctor's dilemma. 2 vols.
(64/65.)

THOMAS:

A passion in Tatters. 2 vols.
(57/58.)

THOMASINA. A biography.
By the author of "Still Waters".
1 vol. (24.)

ANTHONY TROLLOPE:

The Eustace Diamonds. 2 vols.
(35/36.)

Fred Pickering. 1 vol. (66.)

The three clerks. 2 vols. (70/71)

Phineas Redux. 3 vol. (96/98.)

UNDER the greenwood tree. By
the author of "Desperate Re-
medies". 1 vol. (53.)

NB. The numbers in parenthesis are the running ones of the volumes.

Asher's Collection of English Authors will continue to reproduce the best and newest works of English and American literature.

Braddon, Mary Elizabeth,

The dreaded guest and other tales

Bd.: 2

Berlin 1875

P.o.angl. 18 m-102/103

urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11319051-7